Analytical Marxism

Analytical Marxism

A Critique

MARCUS ROBERTS

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To Cherie

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Contemporary Anglophone intellectual culture has been marked by the emergence, since the late 1970s, of a distinctive Marxism, designated 'Analytical' or 'Rational Choice' Marxism by its progenitors, prominent amongst whom have been G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski and Erik Olin Wright. The development of this self-proclaimed 'paradigm' has been sufficiently influential for it to have been credited with constituting the predominant approach in recent Marxist theoretical work. If so, then, for the first time in the tradition's history, the locus of Marxist philosophy has migrated to the Anglo-American academy.[1] Despite the provenance of this attempt at the 'reconstruction' of Marxism – in a hitherto resistant culture – this intellectual tendency has received comparatively little critical attention.[2] This book aims to contribute to a comprehensive history of Marxist philosophy by providing a detailed exposition and critical assessment of the work of the leading contributors to its development.

The book has three – closely related – objectives. Firstly, to identify the distinctive contours of this 'paradigm'. The central point to be made here is a straightforward one. 'Analytical Marxism' designates a species of Marxism distinguished by its *method*, that is, it represents an attempt to reconstruct Marxism upon methodological foundations previously assumed to be antithetical to the Marxist tradition. Secondly, this study aims to assess the contribution the Analytical Marxists have made to the understanding of such substantive problems within contemporary Marxist scholarship as historical evolution, economic crises, exploitation, the analysis of contemporary class structures, the rationality of revolution and the nature of a feasible

socialism. Finally, I will assess how successful this intellectual tendency has been in realising this paradigm's inaugural ambition – nothing less than to construct a (suitably revised) version of classical Marxism upon new and stable methodological foundations.

This book does not aspire to comprehensiveness, if this is understood to require exhaustive exposition of the work of all those writers who have been associated, in one way or another, with Analytical Marxism. In particular, its central chapters concentrate on a thorough exposition and analysis of the attempts of Analytical Marxism's principal architects – in particular Cohen, Elster and Roemer – to reconstruct central Marxist theories.

There are good reasons for this emphasis. Given that the book is centrally occupied with the Analytical Marxists' attempt to reconstruct Marxism (or, at least, to salvage its central insights), I have naturally concentrated on the efforts of its protagonists to revise and defend the central theses of classical Marxism: in particular, the general theory of history and the special theory of capitalism. Having argued that the defining feature of this paradigm is the methodological reorientation of Marxist scholarship demanded by its principal protagonists, I also devote much attention to methodological issues and, in particular, to Elster's defence of that form of rational choice theory premissed in methodological individualism.

Having identified the core of Analytical Marxism in this way it is doubtful whether every writer whose name has been associated with this broad intellectual current can be designated usefully as an 'Analytical' (or 'Rational Choice') Marxist. In particular, Robert Brenner – despite being a contributor to Roemer's collection of seminal Analytical Marxist articles, and a participant in the annual meetings of the so-called 'September Group' (see p. 3) – is hostile to methodological individualism; remains committed to elements of Marx's special theory of capitalism (rejected by all the paradigm's leading lights); and has been a ruthless critic of 'technological determinism'. No definition of Analytical Marxism embracing thinkers as opposed in their methodological, theoretical and political commitments as Brenner and, say, Elster would retain much informative content. Thus Brenner, despite his evident importance and stature within contemporary Marxist historiography, is judged here to be a peripheral figure in the development of Analytical Marxism, and is discussed primarily as a critic of Cohen's defence of Marx's theory of history.

Similarly, I have little to say either about the works of those members of the September Group not allied to Marxism – for instance, the left-wing libertarianism of Hillel Steiner is not discussed at all – or

regarding those works by more central figures which are not directly concerned with Marxism as such, for example, Elster's work on the formation of irrational beliefs and preferences.

Having entered these caveats, this study does aim at comprehensiveness in its coverage of the central themes and theses of Analytical Marxism. In the introductory chapter, I attempt to provide a provisional definition of 'Analytical Marxism' and to set out the critical agenda. I proceed, in chapter two, to an examination of that version of rational choice theory defended by some of Analytical Marxism's principal architects, most notably Elster and Roemer. The following three chapters offer a detailed exposition, and critical examination, of G.A. Cohen's seminal defence of Karl Marx's theory of history. In the course of my critique of Cohen's position, I draw on Brenner's study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in medieval Europe, before considering, and rejecting, Alan Carling's claim that Cohen's 'technological determinism' is compatible with Brenner's historiography. The 'weak historical materialism' proposed by Wright, Levine and Sober is also examined. In chapter six, Roemer's attempted reconstruction of the theory of exploitation and class is critically scrutinised. In chapter seven, I look at Wright's application of Roemer's theory to the analysis of contemporary class structures. This chapter also discusses Przeworski's study of the historical development of European Social Democracy, and concludes with a necessarily brief discussion of Analytical Marxism's recent drift towards ethical socialism. The concluding chapter offers a general verdict on the results and prospects of Analytical Marxism.

A possible limitation of this study concerns the critique developed here: in particular, the argument that this intellectual tendency has failed to reconstruct Marxism. A number of people generous enough to comment on the manuscript have been unsure as to my own position here. In particular, the question arises of the bearings of this failure upon the current results and prospects of Marxism in general. Has this attempted reconstruction failed because Marxism is unreconstructable? Or, alternatively, has it failed due to the inadequacies and lacunae of its 'analytical' incarnation? Some readers have even suspected that my own arguments sometimes appear to presuppose commitment to some alternative version of Marxism – neither articulated nor defended here – presumed to be in perfectly good order as it is.

I have sought to address these issues in revising the manuscript for publication, but, to prevent possible misunderstandings, it is as well to address some remarks directly to them here. I am not allied to any alternative version of Marxism judged to be in good order (although I

do remain committed to socialism as a political project). Moreover, it would be beyond my powers to provide any very clear guidance as to how, if at all, Marxism might be extricated from the Analytical Marxist *impasse*. In summary, my own (current) view is that the development of this paradigm provides further evidence that Marxism is a degenerating research programme, but this does not rule out a comeback in the future. I do hope, however, that this study can contribute not only to a comprehensive history of Marxist philosophy (and of contemporary Anglophone political thought in general), but also to future developments within Marxism. Its significance lies, in particular, in identifying some of the more serious obstacles standing in the way of any future revival of Marxist theory and socialist practice, as well as in providing good reasons for denying the Analytical Marxists the final word on Marxism.

My position regarding Marxism's future is, then, an agnostic one. This will not satisfy all readers, but such are my limitations. To those tempted to accuse me of hedging my bets, I can only respond that this is true enough, but who would be prepared currently to risk a wager on Marxism's prospects?

One final point: it is only since completing this work that I have realised that my critique is, in a number of senses, an *immanent* one. For example, my own discussion is analytical in style; concedes the seriousness of the problems engaged by the Analytical Marxists, and the need to revise Marxism in order to deal with them; and acknowledges the force of their critique of (crude) functionalist and (crude) teleological methodologies. Furthermore, it mobilises the arguments of allies of this paradigm in order to criticise the works of its central protagonists (for example, siding with Wright, Levine and Sober against the methodological individualism defended by Elster, Roemer and Przeworski, and with Brenner against Cohen's defence of technological determinism). To the extent that my critique is an immanent one, the anticipated objection that my argument is weakened by a failure to articulate any clear alternative to Analytical Marxism is less troubling. However, my conclusions may require qualification: it may be that the seeds of a revival of radical theoretical and political practice are to be found within the intellectual current of Analytical Marxism (broadly conceived), in spite of the problems with the work of its central protagonists which are identified and examined here.

This book started out as a PhD thesis upon 'The Origins and Development of Analytical Marxism' which I undertook in 1991 as a condition of my appointment to a Research Assistantship in the School of Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Brighton. The

thesis was completed in 1994 during my tenure of the Baring Fellowship in Human Rights in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Essex. I would like to thank both institutions for providing me with a supportive and stimulating environment within which to work. A number of colleagues at the University of Brighton, as well as providing encouragement and support, found time to read and comment upon draft chapters – in particular, I would like to thank Tom Hickey, Graham McFee and Bob Brecher. During this period I was also fortunate to have the opportunity to present work-in-progress at a number of academic forums. I have benefited from the comments and criticisms of those who attended papers presented at the Philosophy Society at the University of Brighton, the Staff/Graduate Seminar in Political Theory at the University of Sussex, and the Political Theory Workshop at the University of York.

Alex Callinicos acted as external supervisor for the thesis and was characteristically generous with his scarce time and with his extensive knowledge of both the Marxist and 'analytical' traditions. Sean Sayers and Joe McCarney examined the thesis. In the course of an exhaustive (and exhausting) oral interrogation, they managed to pose the questions to which I lacked adequate answers. I have sought to address these difficulties in revising the manuscript for publication. This process has been further assisted by the comments and criticisms I received from two Verso readers and from Robin Blackburn.

My debt to Gregory Elliott is an incalculable one. Acting as my PhD supervisor he directed me to (and through) lines of inquiry that would otherwise have remained unexplored; subjected my work to relentless and incisive critical scrutiny; lavished editorial care on my prose; and made himself available for countless hours of illuminating discussion of the texts and ideas examined here. None of these services was to be withdrawn after he had successfully seen me through the PhD and the time came to revise the original manuscript. For all this, he, like all the aforementioned, should not be presumed to agree with the arguments developed here, or to bear any responsibility for the weaknesses which, given the limits of my energies and competencies, no doubt remain.

This book is dedicated, with love, to my wife, Cherie.

Marcus Roberts
Brighton, September 1995

Abbreviations

AFFS	Roemer, J., *A Future for Socialism* (London 1994)
AM	Roemer, J. (ed), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge 1986)
CSD	Przeworski, A., *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge 1985)
FTL	Roemer, J., *Free to Lose* (London 1988)
GTEC	Roemer, J., *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge 1982)
HLF	Cohen, G.A., *History, Labour and Freedom* (Oxford 1989)
ITKM	Elster, J., *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge 1986)
KMTH	Cohen, G.A., *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford 1978)
MSM	Elster, J., *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge 1985)

1

Introduction: What is Analytical Marxism?

It would be unwise to exaggerate the importance of a single work in establishing a research agenda, but there would be widespread agreement that the genesis of Analytical Marxism can be traced back to the publication of G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (*KMTH*) in 1978. This book was to receive subsequent acknowledgement in most of the succeeding works in the corpus.[1] What was particularly noteworthy about these enthusiastic responses was their emphasis upon the analytical rigour with which Cohen's argument had been executed, rather than upon its ambitious thesis – the defence of an orthodox version of the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism. Indeed, although the substantive argument attracted considerable critical interest, the response was generally sceptical. What really struck the book's many admirers was the extent to which Cohen had succeeded in reconciling the dual constraint he acknowledged at its outset: what Marx wrote – and, in particular, what he wrote in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*; and the standards of rigour and clarity (allegedly) distinctive of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. This book's publication, then, was to provide a rallying point for a group of scholars whose sympathy to Marxism was increasingly strained by what they perceived as the laxity and methodological unsophistication of contemporary Marxist scholarship.

Typical, in this respect, was Elster, who, despite his declaration that Cohen's work had come as 'a revelation', initially responded to its publication by launching a protracted attack upon Cohen's deployment of functional explanation, thereby threatening to undermine the book's

central thesis.[2] Elster's admiration was not compromised by his conviction that the argument was methodologically flawed, and therefore substantively wrong. It was the rigour of the book's execution which, for him, constituted a major progression in Marxist scholarly work. Elster's low estimation of the history of the Marxist tradition is evidenced in his *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (*ITKM*) (1986). He argues that Marxism–Leninism had been 'characterised by a shallow Hegelianism, naive scientism, lack of falsifiability, and a strong preference for assertion over argument';[3] while its principal rival, Western Marxism, is roundly dismissed for its 'obscurantism, utopianism, and irresponsibility'.[4] It is scarcely an exaggeration to characterise the dominant view of the development of Marxism taken by some of the paradigm's leading exponents, as follows: 1867–95, publication of the three volumes of *Capital*; then, the dark ages; then, in 1978, light: the publication of Cohen's defence of Marx's general theory of history. Cohen, on this view, had played Pip to the tradition's Miss Haversham by finally throwing open the curtains and exposing Marxism to a bracing Anglo-American intellectual climate.

The intellectual biographies of Cohen and Elster throw some light upon their emergence as co-founders (alongside John Roemer) of the Analytical Marxist programme. The sort of personal ties which have bound Cohen to the communist movement – his mother had been an active member of, and his father a sympathiser with, the Canadian Communist Party – have never constrained Elster. However, both have written of their long-term dissatisfaction with, and alienation from, the continental trends which had dominated Marxist intellectual life during the two decades prior to the emergence of Analytical Marxism. Cohen recounts that he arrived at Oxford in the 1960s firmly committed to a classical variant of Marxism. More secure in his political – and theoretical – convictions than many of his contemporaries, he was to prove largely immune to Western Marxist currents, and more accepting of orthodox Oxford philosophy. Similarly, Elster tells of his experience as a *pensionnaire étranger* at the Ecole Normale Supérieure during this same period: in particular, of his estrangement from the structuralist Marxism that then dominated Parisian intellectual life. Hostile to Althusserianism, and committed to methodological protocols identified with the political Right, he despaired of finding a Marxist readership for his work. Having completed a study of Leibniz's philosophy, he devoted himself to methodological issues, and to the problem of irrational preference formation, until his faith in the prospects for a Marxism that – at long last – made sense, was restored by the publication of Cohen's defence of historical materialism.[5]

Within a year of the publication of *KMTH*, Elster had become the prime mover in arranging annual meetings of a group of scholars for the purpose of discussing the full range of issues in Marxist theory. Cohen was later to list the original membership of this group, to which he belongs, as follows: Pranab Bardham, Robert Brenner, Jon Elster, Adam Przeworski, John Roemer, Hillel Steiner, Robert Van der Veen, Philippe Van Parijs and Erik Olin Wright. Cohen observes that the 'September Group' is composed of '(sufficiently) like-minded investigators',[6] while Erik Olin Wright writes of a body of leftist scholars of 'varying degrees of sympathy to Marxism'.[7] More recently, Wright has emphasised the theoretical and political diversity of the Septembrists: their failure to achieve consensus on any important substantive issue; their disagreements over methodological questions; and their different political affiliations – ranging, apparently, from 'revolutionary democratic socialism' through to what Wright calls 'left-wing libertarianism'.[8]

The impression, then, is of a fairly loose association, united neither by shared positions on substantive issues in Marxist scholarship, nor by any programmatic ambitions for the realisation of socialism. 'Like-mindedness' seems to amount primarily to a shared commitment to the standards of discourse and argumentation practised by professional scholars in the contemporary Anglophone academy – alongside varying degrees of commitment to Marxism – and a shared belief that the ruthless application of these standards will serve finally to distinguish what is valuable in Marxism from what is retrograde. This is combined with a somewhat self-congratulatory insistence upon their own intellectual clarity, honesty, maturity and sophistication. The tone here is well captured by the alternative name for the 'September Group' – the NBSMG, or 'Non-Bullshit Marxism Group'.

Roughly contemporaneous with the initiation of these meetings, a series of 'Studies in Marxism and Social Theory' was launched, under the auspices of Cambridge University Press and the Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, and jointly edited by Cohen, Elster and Roemer. Major works in the development of Analytical Marxism were subsequently to appear under its imprint, including Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (*MSM*) (1985), Przeworski's *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (*CSD*) (1985), and the collection of articles published under the title *Analytical Marxism* (*AM*), and edited by Roemer (1986).

The prospectus for this series – as stated in the jacket notes – furnishes something of a programmatic statement of the Analytical Marxist project:

> The books in this series are intended to exemplify a new paradigm in the study of Marxist social theory. They will not be dogmatic or purely exegetical in approach. Rather they will examine and develop the theory pioneered by Marx, in the light of the intervening history, and with the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy. It is hoped that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discredited methods and presuppositions which are still widely regarded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established.[9]

The emphasis is, again, upon a methodological reorientation: the 'dogmatism' consisting in both an allegiance to 'discredited methods' and an acceptance of substantive presuppositions adjudged to be unsustainable in the light of twentieth-century historical developments, i.e., given 'the chequered success of socialism and the dubious failure of capitalism'.[10] There is also the promise that a recognisable *Marxism* can survive the jettisoning of these aberrations – that 'what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established'.

The 'intervening history', then, comprises intellectual history. But the unpropitious social and political history of the twentieth century has also been an important reason for attempting a rigorous overhaul of Marxist theory. Thus, Roemer's early works were concerned with the persistence of exploitation in allegedly socialist countries; Przeworski has worked predominantly on the historically attested paradoxes of electoral socialism; and Wright has been preoccupied with the complex class maps of contemporary capitalist societies.[11] However, there has not been much by way of direct engagement with historical developments comparable, for example, to Trotsky's work on the bureaucratisation of the USSR or even Marcuse's analysis of the technocratic society. The failures of 'actually existing socialism', and the continuing vitality of advanced industrial capitalism, have generally encouraged a dejected return to the philosophical drawing board, rather than a strategic engagement with conjunctural (social, political or economic) developments. And this was so during a period that was to witness the triumph of Thatcherism in Great Britain and of Reaganism in the United States.

The intervening years between the publication of *KMTH* and the appearance of the first major works in the 'Marxism and Social Theory' series witnessed the publication of Roemer's *A General Theory of Class and Exploitation* (*GTEC*) (1982). This work constitutes the most ambitious attempt to date at the reconstruction of a substantive position in classical Marxism. Roemer argues that exploitation will emerge given only initial inequalities in the resource endowment of

individuals, the introduction of either a labour or a capital market being sufficient to ensure the emergence of classes. All this follows, according to Roemer, as a consequence of the rational choices of unequally endowed utility maximisers, that is, uncoercively and within the sphere of circulation.

This clearly constitutes a major revision of classical Marxism. For Marx the relationship between the worker and the individual capitalist, in the sphere of circulation, was indeed 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man'.[12] To criticise the *exchange relationship* as an unjust or exploitative one was, from the perspective of classical Marxism, fundamentally to misconceive the logic of the capitalist system: exploitation commenced when the worker fell from the Eden of exchange into the netherworld that lay behind the factory gates (that is, once he entered into 'the sphere of production').

Apart from the significance of Roemer's departure from the classical Marxist analysis of exploitation, there is another respect in which this ambitious undertaking represented both a continuation of, and a departure from, the less revisionist earlier work of Cohen. While Roemer honours the commitment to non-Marxist methodologies – praising both Cohen and Elster for their 'precision and ruthless standards'[13] – this is the first major work within the Analytical Marxist corpus to deploy neoclassical economic models and game-theoretic techniques in order to develop a central Marxist concept.

The use of such formal modelling techniques is by no means a universal feature of the work within this self-styled paradigm, despite its widespread designation as 'Rational Choice Marxism'. Indeed, amongst the major works generally taken as defining the Analytical Marxist corpus, only those by Roemer and Przeworski have involved extensive use of rational choice techniques. While Elster has persistently advocated their use, he has concentrated his efforts in the philosophy of social explanation, rather than upon the careful development and deployment of such models. There is good evidence, however, that the adoption of such techniques – regarded, to put it mildly, with suspicion by many Marxist critics of the corpus – is widely approved by other exponents of the paradigm. Thus, in *Classes*, Wright revises his earlier (Althusserian) work on contemporary class structures by mobilising the insights developed by Roemer; and Cohen allows the usefulness of rational choice theory – in work on exploitation, class struggle, class alliances and revolution – while arguing that it cannot account for 'the world-historical facts that there was a bourgeois revolution and that there will be a proletarian one (if there will be a proletarian one)'.[14]

Moreover, while Przeworski's work on electoral socialism, Elster's discussions of class struggle and alliances, and Roemer's revision of the Marxist concept of exploitation, all deploy rational choice theory, they do so in pursuit of rather different objectives. In particular, while Elster and Przeworski seek explanations of concrete historical events and an insight into the strategic problems facing socialist movements, Roemer has been primarily engaged in a form of conceptual explication. In this sense Roemer's work – its 'history' entirely hypothetical – is in the social contractarian tradition which can be traced from Hobbes through to Rawls, while the work of the other two is more closely analogous in its intent to neoclassical economic analysis. There are important distinctions to be made within the corpus which are concealed by casual designation and discussion of a (homogeneous) paradigm based on rational choice theory.

By the mid-1980s the Analytical Marxist programme had extended to engage with virtually all of the substantive theses and conceptual apparatus of classical Marxism, with major works appearing on historical materialism, Marxist economics, class structure, political struggle, exploitation and ethics. It had drawn in scholars from the full range of disciplines in the humanities. By this time most of the innovative works undertaken by its exponents had appeared: the years 1985–6 marking a high watermark, with the publication of major works by Elster, Przeworski and Wright, as well as the appearance of the Cambridge University Press anthology. The years since have certainly seen important and innovative publications – in particular, Cohen's *History, Labour and Freedom* (*HLF*) (1988). However, this volume was in fact a collection of previously published and suitably revised articles. The general trend of more recent works has been to return to the ground mapped out in earlier publications, either to revise it or to make it more accessible, alongside a critical engagement with the publications of fellow Analytical Marxists, and an increasing preoccupation with the philosophy of social explanation itself. Thus, in a recent publication, Wright, Levine and Sober acknowledge that the principal concerns of Analytical Marxists 'have long ceased to be Marxism as such'.[15]

Towards a Definition

There are a number of problems in specifying the defining features of this 'paradigm': witness the divergent labels which have been attached to it, including 'Analytical', 'Rational Choice' and 'Neoclassical'

Marxism. Given that its very identification as a distinctive species of Marxism was, initially, asserted by its protagonists, the obvious way to proceed is to begin with an *extensional* definition of the paradigm and, having identified a somewhat heterogeneous list of principal texts and allied scholars, proceed to abstract some kind of *intensional* definition capturing the common ground which they all occupy, despite their different approaches and preoccupations. This would seem the only way to proceed. We are dealing with a self-defined grouping of scholars who are, more or less self-consciously, pursuing a research agenda, but who frequently draw attention to its heterogeneity. Such a procedure poses the immediate problem of deciding what are to count as criteria for inclusion. For example, Wright has attended the meetings of the 'September Group', was a contributor to Roemer's collection and has developed Roemer's work on exploitation in his analysis of class structures. But, in the Preface to *Classes*, he explicitly distinguishes himself from the 'Analytical Marxists', while acknowledging that they have had a considerable impact on his own thinking.[16] Wright has also been a perceptive and uncompromising critic of the doctrine of 'methodological individualism': a doctrine that some of the paradigm's leading exponents – most notably, Elster – have insisted is absolutely fundamental if Marxism is finally to be erected upon respectable methodological foundations.

Before proceeding to consider what is distinctive about this work, we should notice what is not distinctive of it: the much-vaunted commitment to 'rigour and clarity'. While its protagonists recognise that the work of Marxism's founders is as often marked by rigorous exposition as by 'methodological unsophistication', they have a distinct tendency to be desperately uncharitable in their assessments of the pre-history of Marxist scholarship. Reading many of the central texts in the Western Marxist corpus, one is not forcibly struck by their obscurity or utopianism or irresponsibility. Nor does one detect in the writings of, for example, Gramsci or Marcuse any reluctance to depart from the writings of Marxism's founders, or any failure to confront the need for theoretical revisions in the face of historical developments. The reiterated insistence in the Analytical Marxist corpus upon breaking free of hagiographical and obscurantist tendencies strikes a gratuitous polemical note.

Wright's remarks at the outset of *Classes* do, however, provide a useful point of departure for any attempt to identify the paradigm's distinctive contours. On the basis of personal involvement in the group meetings, he suggests that when its progenitors talk about Analytical Marxism what they have in mind is 'the systematic interrogation of

basic concepts and their reconstruction into a more coherent structure'.[17] This is a fairly unambiguous pointer to the centrality of philosophy – as conceived in the twentieth-century analytical tradition – in the self-definition of the Analytical Marxist programme. Wright, principally concerned with sociology, would therefore naturally perceive himself as a beneficiary of Analytical Marxism rather than as a direct participant in its evolution. This account, then, enables us to identify a core group of participants whose central preoccupations are philosophical, in the stated sense, and who have also been the prime movers in the organisational development of the paradigm: *viz.*, Cohen, Roemer and Elster. This inner circle might then be distinguished from an outer circle consisting of those who have been represented in the group's discursive and published forums, and who have more or less explicitly acknowledged their debts to, and involvement with, the work of its core exponents. The most influential figures here would include Adam Przeworski and Erik Olin Wright.

The terms 'Analytical' and 'Rational Choice' Marxism are clearly suggestive of an intensional definition which situates this work within the Marxist tradition, but distinguishes it by its *method*. However, the former designation is more appropriate in capturing the broad parameters of this common ground, which has amounted as much to a shared discursive space as to a rallying point for the supporters of any set of substantive positions. At this level of abstraction, Analytical Marxism is defined by little more than a willingness to apply the standards of rigorous conceptual and logical analysis which are adjudged characteristic of contemporary Anglophone academic life, to the tenets of classical Marxism and the work of other participants. Its practitioners, then, are united *around* a set of 'analytical' procedures, rather than *behind* any distinctive theoretical or political programme.

Such a view is supported by the fact that participants have, from the outset, as often been engaged in criticising the work of other exponents as they have in developing and applying it. It is also suggested by a pervasive, if not fully explicit, hostility to the perceived hagiography which has, or so it is argued, too often bedevilled the Marxist tradition. Thus, Elster writes of the September Group's meetings:

> An interesting outcome of these discussions is that the sense in which we felt able to call ourselves Marxists had undergone a change over the years. I do not feel that I can speak for others than myself, except to say that there is probably not a single tenet of classical Marxism which has not been the object of insistent criticism at these meetings.[18]

Similarly, Roemer observes that the contributors to his collection 'view Marx as an important intellectual ancestor, but they also acknowledge that he died over a century ago'.[19] Analytical Marxists, then, are not intimidated either by Marxism's founders or by their fellow reconstructors of Marxism: nothing is sacred. The implication of such remarks is that a liberation from classical orthodoxy, and the adoption of an uncompromisingly critical posture, have inevitably led to the creation of a discursive space distinguished exactly by its capacity to accommodate conflicts and disagreements, but also to permit the settlement of such disputes through appeal to basic standards of rational argumentation which are recognised by these diverse participants. But this willingness to depart from classical Marxism, and this welcoming of disagreement, is by no means unique to this group – it has been a characteristic of all the most fertile periods in the tradition's history. What is unique about Analytical Marxism is the particular discursive tradition and intellectual culture to which it has accommodated itself. Denying that there is any reputable methodology that is distinctive of Marxism, 'Cohen and his co-thinkers have casually crossed the supposedly impassable border between Marxism and the academic mainstream in philosophy and social theory'.[20]

The following remarks by Gilbert Ryle (a prominent exponent of linguistic philosophy and Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford from 1945) on the development of academic philosophy at the turn of the century are suggestive here:

> This new professional practice of submitting problems and arguments to the expert criticism of fellow craftsmen led to a growing concern with questions of philosophical technique and a growing passion for ratiocinative rigour. Eloquence will not silence rival experts and edification is not palatable to colleagues. Nor is the span of an article or a discussion-paper broad enough to admit of a crusade against, or a crusade on behalf of, any passive 'Ism'. Philosophers had now to be philosophers' philosophers; and in their colloquia there was as little room for party politics as there is in a court of law.[21]

This emphasis on 'philosophical technique', 'ratiocinative rigour', and on the colloquia of fellow professionals certainly captures something of the self-perception of participants. The academic locus of Analytical Marxism – its severance from any political movement or institution – has been remarked by its critics and acknowledged by participants and sympathisers alike. Moreover, the paradigm's exponents do appear to view the basic presuppositions and standards of inquiry which underpin twentieth-century Anglophone intellectual culture as ideologically

neutral – and therefore, in this sense, see the professional academy as analogous to a court of law.

However, there are two central problems here. In the first place, this paradigm is, at least superficially, an attempt at the reconstruction of – if not exactly a crusade on behalf of – a 'massive "Ism"'. This needs qualifying because the paradigm's exponents have denied that Marxism is distinguished by any particular methodology and, consequently, have accepted its reduction to a set of substantive claims to be prised apart and independently interrogated. In the second place, such a broad conception of the analytical forum would draw in most of the paradigm's critics – both on the Left and the Right – whose writings have not been short on rigour or on clarity. The 'analytical' forum, in this broad sense, is itself an arena for disputations not only about substantive claims, but also about the underlying methodological issues themselves: a forum which has accommodated the debate between the Analytical Marxists and their critics. Indeed, the paradigm's progenitors have typically distinguished themselves from previous Marxist traditions on more specific methodological grounds than are captured by appeals to a broad analytical trend in contemporary intellectual life.

The significant departure in Analytical Marxism is essentially methodological. This might appear to provide good grounds for a designation stressing the wide deployment of models drawn from the neoclassical tradition, and the broader applications of the rational choice theory which is derivative of it. Certainly, such models have been widely adopted by key participants and, explicitly or implicitly, condoned by all the paradigm's leading lights.

However, the designation 'Analytical Marxism' will be preferred here to 'Rational Choice Marxism' – the latter being reserved for that work within the corpus which does deploy rational choice theory – for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is the chosen self-definition of the principal participants. In the second place, the narrower designation conceals the degree to which the philosophy of social explanation has itself been a recurrent theme, and a source of significant disagreements, within this corpus. Thirdly, a definitional stress on rational choice theory directs attention away from significant work on tenets of the classical tradition not amenable to such techniques (for example, in ethics); as well as from the controversial acceptance of other methodological tools, drawn from the analytical tradition more narrowly conceived (for example, Cohen's endorsement of ordinary language philosophy). Perhaps the stress should be upon the first point – taking 'Analytical Marxism' as the self-designation of an identifiable body of work, but not prejudging either its homogeneity or its distinctiveness.

The *prima facie* appeal of adopting the more precise, and methodologically bounded, 'Rational Choice Marxism' is that it enables the critic to delineate a distinct body of work. But it is exactly such paraphrastic conveniences which should be eschewed if the cohesion and distinctiveness of the paradigm is not to be prejudged.[22]

The Critical Agenda

A comprehensive account of the origins and development of Analytical Marxism requires an extended discussion of the 'paradigm' that engages with problems at two distinct – but closely related – levels. Firstly, there are those questions that arise in view of Analytical Marxism's *location* – in various senses: historical, geographical, institutional, intellectual, etc. These sorts of questions have an obvious relevance for the project of tracing its history – and of identifying its specificity – but have also provided the basis for some important Marxist critiques of the whole project. Secondly, the principal positions, arguments and theories – both methodological and substantive – that have been produced in the course of Analytical Marxism's development require to be described, discussed and critically assessed. The aim of this study is to honour, as far as possible, this dual obligation. But first, some brief introductory remarks regarding these two general issues.

Firstly, then, the problem of location. The point here is a simple one. Marxists have not viewed, and – in view of Marxist epistemology and social theory – cannot view, intellectual practice in complete abstraction from the historical, social and political contexts in which this practice occurs. Intellectuals are not the guardians of some mysterious realm of eternal Platonic 'ideas': they are condemned instead to participate in definite social practices within definite historical conjunctures. Viewed in this way, one might reasonably conclude that conditions within the Anglophone academy of the late twentieth century are desperately unpropitious for the project of 'reconstructing' Marxism. Politically, this period has witnessed the resurgence of an unapologetic neoliberal capitalism throughout the advanced industrial countries; the full-scale retreat of European Social Democracy; and the collapse of historical communism. All this has prompted proclamations of Marxism's – and, indeed, socialism's – final dissolution.

Nor has academic life been unaffected by this general drift towards the Right. If many universities in the 1960s and early 1970s were dominated by scholars of varying degrees of sympathy to Marxism, it is

likely that from the late 1970s onwards most philosophy and social science departments in Britain and the USA have been dominated by a mixture of liberals and libertarians. It was surely not easy to be a libertarian in some university departments in the late 1960s, and it seems reasonable to say that it is has not been easy to remain a Marxist within many Anglo-American universities in more recent times. To be a Marxist today is, perhaps more than ever before, to swim against the tide: a tide possessed of a powerful undertow.

This leads us directly to the most fundamental of these problems of location: the paradigm's location within the history of a form of *intellectual practice* – that is, its adoption of contemporary Anglophone philosophical and social scientific techniques. This has been done, apparently, in the belief that the Senior Common Room is indeed a neutral 'court of law', presided over by 'philosophers' philosophers', who – contemptuous of 'party politics', and unallied to any 'massive "ism"' – can be relied upon to give Marxism a fair trial. Unsurprisingly, this has proved particularly difficult for most Marxists to swallow. Throughout its history the 'analytical' tradition, understood in a broad sense, has been hostile to (even contemptuous of) Marxism in particular, and continental philosophy in general. Thus, Ree notes that, during the 1950s in the Senior Common Room at Oxford, our 'philosopher's philosophers' found a welcome release from their obligations to maintain heroic intellectual impartiality by 'telling each other funny stories about foreigners'. In illustration of this point, Ree proceeds to quote from Hare's 'A School for Philosophers':

> The German philosopher will say something relating to his own philosophical views; the British philosopher will then say that he cannot understand what has been said, and will ask for an elucidation. The German will take this, the first time it happens to him, for an encouragement, and will go on expounding his views; but he will be disappointed by the reaction. What was desired, it turns out, was not more of the same sort of thing: what the British philosopher wanted was to take just one sentence that the German had uttered – say the first sentence – or perhaps, for a start, just one word in this sentence; and he wanted an explanation given of the way in which the word was being used . . . Nothing pleases us so much as to sit back and have a German metaphysician explain to us, if he can, how he is going to get his metaphysical system started. And as he is usually unable to do this, the discussion never gets on to what he thinks of as the meat of the theory. This is a great disappointment to him . . .[23]

A philosophical school capable of such prep school parochialism and spontaneous chauvinism would hardly seem to be conducive to the

reconstruction of the theories of a German theorist who had been inspired by the greatest of all German metaphysicians. It is not surprising, then, that Marxist critics of the analytical turn have been deeply suspicious of the introduction of mainstream methodologies – pioneered by intellectuals broadly hostile to Marxism – as the alleged precondition of Marxism's salvation. This is particularly starkly illustrated by the adoption of rational choice theory, originated by neoclassical economists, and extended to other fields of social inquiry by professedly anti-Marxist scholars – prominent among whom have been Popper, Olson, Downs, and Becker.[24] These suspicions have been exacerbated by the insensitivity to the history of ideas evidenced in the work of the Analytical Marxists. Ellen Wood, for example, argues that the extent of this methodological importation from right-wing political theory has been neither fully acknowledged nor properly guarded against. This genealogy demands investigation and illumination: whether or not Rational Choice Marxism is a game that merits the candle, it seems unwise to play it in the dark.[25]

Marxist hostility to Anglophone philosophy in general, and to the linguistic turn in particular, received its most extreme expression in the work of the Frankfurt School. For example, in a passage as entertaining for its cavalier reading of Wittgenstein as for its polemical force, Marcuse accused Wittgenstein's admirers of 'academic sadomasochism, self-humiliation, and self-denunciation'.[26] The assurance that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is', while a pithy and memorable slogan, is hardly the stuff of revolution. The linguistic analyst, argued Marcuse, had accommodated him/herself to a distorted grammar which it was the intellectual's task to expose, not collaborate with. The linguistic philosopher 'takes the impoverished language as he finds it, insulating it from that which is not expressed in it although it enters the established universe of discourse as an element and factor of meaning'.[27] Moreover, continues Marcuse, linguistic analysts were fiddling while Rome (indeed, all of Europe) burned; he wryly remarks that 'Wittgenstein devotes much acumen and space to the analysis of "My broom is in the corner"'.[28]

None of this, however, has impressed the leading Analytical Marxists. Not because they deny the facts of the matter, but because they dismiss them as irrelevant to the success or otherwise of their project: 'Sure, we are adopting methods pioneered by anti-Marxist theorists, but, so what – why give the devil all the best tunes?' Thus, Roemer throws down the gauntlet to Marxist critics inclined to challenge the ideological neutrality of rational choice theory: '[i]f Marxists wish to impugn the intellectual unbiasedness of rational choice methods they

must show precisely where the dirty work is being done. What hypothesis should be changed? In what sense is the characterisation of rationality wrong?'[29] This sounds fair enough: although, given the apparent incompatibility between historical materialism and this claim for the ideological neutrality of contemporary theoretical production, there is room for suspicion regarding the sleight-of-hand with which Roemer hands the burden of proof over to the paradigm's critics. If historical materialists are committed to the presumption of the historicity of theoretical production, then Roemer is here challenging not just (some) Marxists, but also Marxism itself.

But this challenge also obscures a more fundamental question which will be the central issue engaged here: even if the intellectual tool kit developed within the twentieth-century Anglophone academy were entirely free of ideological infestation (and it will be argued that it is not), it would not therefore follow that it can be deployed in order successfully to *reconstruct Marxism*. After all, it is precisely these same techniques that have been deployed by mainstream philosophers and social scientists in their efforts to finish Marxism off once and for all. Applying identical tools to the same raw materials might appear to have foredoomed this whole project from the outset. So a central question will be whether or not an Analytical Marxism is *possible*. Does this attempt to 'reconstruct' Marxism through the application of 'analytical' methodologies establish a tension, resolvable only if one term in this equation either disgorges or swallows up the other? If so, then a clear choice emerges: between the salvation of Marxism – as a distinctive research programme informing (and informed by) a radical political practice – and the uncritical acceptance of 'state-of-the-art', 'analytical' techniques. Or, alternatively, it may be that we are finally forced to conclude that the best to be hoped for is the demise of Marxism as an *alternative* to the theoretical and political mainstream, but the salvaging of those Marxian claims adjudged fit – once suitably modified – for admission into the hallowed mainstream of social science: that is, not so much the *reconstruction* of Marxism as its *absorption*.

2

The Methodological Foundations of Rational Choice Marxism

The case for a distinctive Rational Choice Marxism has been developed by the most methodologically self-conscious of all of its supporters: Elster. In the opening pages of *ITKM*, he is at pains to emphasise that, although he does view Marx as an important intellectual ancestor, this familial relationship is a distant – and distinctly cool – one. Elster may be family, but famulus he emphatically is not. Marx, he declares, was 'almost never' right about anything: his facts were frequently inaccurate; he was prone to make sweeping generalisations; and he worked within a misguided theoretical and methodological framework. If Elster's relationship to Marx is ambiguous, there is little ambiguity in his remarks on the intervening development of the Marxist tradition. The rigid theoretical orthodoxies imposed by the Second and Third Internationals preserved some of the more fanciful of nineteenth-century dalliances; in combination with the crudest of late-nineteenth-century scientisms, these survived into the late twentieth-century set in the concrete of 'Marxism–Leninism'. As for Western Marxism, it indulged in those excesses common to adolescents with austere parents: utopianism, obscurantism and irresponsibility. Elster traces these multiple failures to an unholy methodological trinity of methodological collectivism, crude functionalism, and dialectical deduction: the principal culprit is Hegel.[1] The attempted transposition of the Hegelian dialectic, or so the Analytical Marxists have argued, failed to rescue any 'rational kernel' from the 'mystical shell' of Hegel's idealism. Instead, Marx's famous inversion of Hegel bequeathed a fatal legacy of Hegelian mystifications, which have distorted and retarded the tradition's development ever since.

Methodological collectivism, according to Elster, is premissed on the often unstated assumption that supra-individual entities ('firms', 'classes', 'societies', 'nations', etc.) have explanatory priority over individuals.[2] The methodological collectivist, or so it is argued, begins by ascribing laws of development to some supra-individual process or entity, and then proceeds to explain individual actions as the mere expression of these supra-individual developmental laws. For example, Elster argues that Marx's philosophy of history retained the Hegelian assumption that history was not a slaughterhouse, but a meaningful process: a process governed by discoverable ('dialectical') laws, through which a collective subject ('humanity') alienates itself from itself in order finally to regain itself in an enriched form.[3] Real historical individuals, then, are demeaned to the status of puppets or automata, foredoomed to play out their allotted roles in an elaborate costume drama, through which real history proceeds – with a terrible necessity – towards its millennial consummation.

It is further argued, by Elster, that according explanatory primacy to generic abstractions often leads to *teleologism*: it is a short step, or so he claims, from ascribing explanatory primacy to collective entities to speaking as if they enjoyed *ontological* independence.[4] The methodological collectivist can come to speak as if 'history', 'humanity' or 'the working class' were an independent agent: a locus of consciousness, with its own desires and intentions, and with the capacity to act in order to realise its goals. Elster argues that this is more than merely a constant temptation, it is a necessary presumption of dialectical theories of history. Humanity abandons primitive unity for the nightmare of an alienated existence *in order to* regain itself in that higher unity that eventually consummates human history. But to endure 'sub-optimal' intervals in order to secure the best final outcome is a case of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Only a conscious agent could adopt and pursue the indirect strategy of taking one step backwards into industrial capitalism *for the purpose* of taking two steps forward into the communist future.[5] Once it is admitted that no such strategy is consciously pursued by historical individuals, and that the pursuit of such a strategy must be wilful and intentional, the only options are either to ascribe consciousness to some supra-individual agency or – in flagrant violation of the logic of intentional concepts – to posit a disembodied intentionality.

In *MSM*, Elster traces the genealogy of the Marxist philosophy of history back through Hegel to Leibniz.[6] Leibniz made sense. He ascribed a telos to human history, but did so without violating propositional logic. It was God who decided that sub-optimal intervals were

a price worth paying for the best of all possible worlds. The purposes that drove history were divine purposes, the predicates had a subject and the subject was God. Hegel retained the idea that history had a goal, but denied the existence of a creator intervening in human history to secure that goal. Hegel did not make sense. The liberation of predicates from the tyranny of subjects was a bridge too far for even the most determined of emancipatory theorists. Elster argues that secular teleologism is also pronounced – albeit 'with some variations over time' – in Marx's own writings. Marx did not always make sense. Elster writes that '*Humanity* was for Marx what Spirit or Reason was for Hegel – the supra-individual entity whose full development is the goal of history, even though it is not endowed with the qualities of an intentional agent who could act to bring about that goal'.[7] The rejection of teleologism is ostensibly premissed only in an insistence upon the incontrovertibility of the rules of formal logic. In other words, the point is a formal and 'analytical' one: verbs require (appropriate) subjects.[8]

Elster argues that recourse to teleologism is particularly evident in the persistent appeal to crude functional explanations in the work of Marxism's founders and their successors: the action of some agent or group is 'explained' by identifying its *actual* – rather than its *intended* – consequences. For example, he claims that after 1850 Marx responded to growing evidence that the capitalist state often acted in the interests of the working class by asserting that apparently autonomous state policies in fact served the long-term interests of capital. Thus, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx argues that the bourgeoisie endured the Bonapartist regime because the long-term interests of capital dictated that it should 'forfeit its crown' so as to secure its 'purse'.[9] The rule of the Emperor in France, or of an aristocracy in England, appeared to contradict the theory of the capitalist state entailed by Marx's general theory of history; his response was to assert that, under specific historical circumstances, the non-capitalist state was beneficial for capitalism and, by implication, that these benefits explained its survival. Elster argues that the tendency to explain events and actions simply by identifying their benefits for capitalism is rampant in contemporary Marxist social science – pervading the analysis of the capitalist state, the theory of crime and punishment, studies of racial discrimination and the analysis of education.

The principal objections to crude functionalism are ostensibly formal ones. To attempt to explain actions by identifying their actual benefits for some individual or class is to posit disembodied goals bereft of historical actors. An *action* is, by definition, intentional. But

to intend something presupposes that it has been anticipated and that it has entered into the strategic calculations of the relevant actors. Thus, Elster writes that functional explanation seeks 'to explain behaviour *simply* by pointing to the fact that it has beneficial consequences for some agent or agents'; the actions of individuals are explained, not by citing their conscious intentions, but with reference only to 'the *actual* consequences' of their actions.[10] For example, imagine that a firm has been releasing industrial waste into the sea for decades, and then it is unexpectedly discovered that releasing this particular effluent actually benefits the environment. It is patently absurd to leap from the identification of this benefit to the claim that it *explains* the actions of the firm's management. To explain the firm's actions, one must investigate its decision-making processes, which were informed only by the anticipated consequences of releasing the industrial waste (say, increased profitability), and not by the unanticipated long-term consequences (the environmental benefits). Of course, it may be the case that actors are motivated by long-term benefits, but then what is explanatory is not – as with crude forms of functional explanation – the benefits *per se*, but the intentions of those actors who foresaw and desired them. This kind of crude functional explanation, then, violates a fundamental rule of logic: causes must precede their effects, that is, to explain an action undertaken at *t1* simply by identifying its consequences at *t2* is to presuppose that an earlier event can be explained by a later one.

Finally, Elster argues that recourse to a privileged 'dialectical' logic, and to pseudo-scientific dialectical laws, has often served to provide the perpetrators of naked logical violations, and the practitioners of bad science, with the cover of a pitch-black obscurantism. The problems with the dialectical conception of history that Marx inherited from Hegel have already been discussed. History, on this account, necessarily progresses through three dialectical stages (the two lower stages breaking down under the force of their immanent contradictions): (i) primitive and undifferentiated community (thesis/pre-capitalism); (ii) extreme individualism (antithesis/capitalism/negation); and, finally, (iii) the restoration of a higher form of community, preserving whatever was valuable in the individualism that had been achieved in the second stage (synthesis/communism/the 'negation of the negation'). Elster accepts that this conception can provide useful insights into a range of, not uncommon, processes;[11] but he adamantly rejects Engels's elevation of this suggestive idiom to the status of a set of inviolable scientific laws: dialectics is merely 'a cluster of vague, suggestive ideas, it does not offer scientific tools with analytical cutting edges'.[12] Thus understood, to quote H.B. Acton, Marxism is 'a mixture of two philosophies which

cannot consistently go along together, positivism on the one hand and Hegelianism on the other'.[13] They 'cannot consistently go along together' because the resolution of contradictions is possible only for a conscious being: this view of history is comprehensible – if indefensible – when allied to an idealist philosophy, but it is incomprehensible when allied to a materialist conception of history. As for the *logical* principle of non-contradiction, this tells us that contradictions are not false but meaningless. Were someone to say 'It is Tuesday and it is not Tuesday' they would be making sounds, but they would not be saying anything. The dialectician cannot respond to this by arguing that many contradictions of this form are fertile for intellectual development. As Karl Popper argued, contradictions – in this sense of the term – are 'fruitful, or fertile, or productive of progress' solely by virtue of our resolution not to tolerate them.[14] The history of ideas progresses through contradictions precisely because, and only in so far as, we eschew Hegelian mystifications and insist upon the principle of non-contradiction. As for 'dialectical deduction' – the claim that concepts (for example, 'money') have higher concepts (for example, 'capital') immanent within them – Elster argues that this is unadorned nonsense, lacking even a certain idiomatic charm and potency: '[c]oncepts have no logic of development', period.[15]

So long as the formal requirements of logical analysis are granted, the case against such 'discredited methodologies' as teleologism, crude functionalism and dialectical logic might appear to be incontrovertible. The kinds of arguments deployed by Elster, in order to undermine these methodologies, are reliant upon seemingly uncontroversial logical propositions: collective nouns do not refer to ontologically distinct things; actions require agents; causes precede effects; and two contradictory propositions cannot be meaningfully asserted simultaneously by the same person. Surely, no ideological dirty work is being done here. If contemporary socialists are to advance rigorous and coherent arguments for socialism, then this requires acceptance of some basic logical standards to mark the boundaries between rigour and ridiculousness. Without such rules of engagement Marxists would be foredoomed to talk, in perpetuity, only to (some of) themselves.

However, while the arguments against these disreputable methodological practices often carry an air of incontrovertibility, they give scant support to the programmatic demands made by the advocates of Rational Choice Marxism. For example, it will be argued that none of these logical points actually counts against 'methodological collectivism' and in favour of 'methodological individualism', but only against that species of 'methodological collectivism' which has surrendered to the

twin temptations of ontological over-extension and teleological mystification. Similarly – as we shall see in the next chapter – crude versions of functionalism do not necessarily preclude viable forms of functional explanation. Some supporters of the paradigm have a pronounced tendency to write as if the acceptance of 'analytical' philosophical techniques and the deployment of 'state-of-the-art' social-scientific tools were straightforwardly connected. In fact, the only legitimate connection which might be made is that the 'rigorous' conduct of debates in the philosophy of social explanation will drive the paradigm's opponents to concede the impartiality and fertility of contemporary non-Marxist social-scientific practices. If this is not the case, then it is possible to enjoy all the advantages of the 'Analytical Marxist', without conceding the viability of a neoclassical variant of Marxism.

Methodological Individualism

Elster, then, attacks methodological collectivism because he considers it to be premissed on the assumption that supra-individual entities ('capital', 'the working class', etc.) are prior to individuals in explanatory orderings. He argues that this assumption is closely linked to a naive form of functionalism: the objective benefits of some outcome – for some collective entity – are taken to explain the actions of those individuals who produce that outcome. Elster insists that actions must be explained with reference only to the beliefs, desires and intentions of 'individuals'. Against methodological collectivism he insists upon an uncompromising *methodological individualism*, defined as 'the doctrine that all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions'. As Elster has acknowledged, this methodological commitment is liable to encourage some critics to place him and his supporters on the Right ('Somehow methodological individualism and political individualism (or libertarianism) had become associated with one another'[16]).

The belief that there is a close link between *methodological* individualism and *political* individualism is well supported by cursory scrutiny of the history of ideas. The doctrine can arguably be traced back to the work of Hobbes, and its most prominent recent champions include Von Mises, Popper, and Hayek. For example, Hayek has written that 'there is no other way towards an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed towards other people and guided by their expected behaviour'.[17] Both Hayek

and Popper explicitly make the connection between methodological and political individualism: for them methodological collectivism leads more or less directly to the secret police and the poorly stocked High Street. The evidence for a close link between political and methodological individualism is strengthened when we take into account the recent development of Elster's own thought. For example, in *The Cement of Society*, he boldly declares that '[t]here are no societies, only individuals who interact with each other'.[18] So what is meant by 'society'? Elster informs us that the term refers 'to any area which has a local maximum of cohesiveness, so that any slightly smaller or slightly larger area has a lower coefficient'.[19] Armed with this insight Elster sets out to tackle what he now considers to be the central question for social theory: 'How is spontaneous order possible?' or 'the Hayek problem' (prompting the obvious answer that *spontaneous* order is not possible).[20] The evidence for a close link between methodological individualism and political liberalism may, then, seem at least as compelling as that, offered by Elster, for a close link between methodological collectivism and objective teleologism.

The case that Elster makes for methodological individualism relies upon two central arguments. Firstly, he maintains that reductionism – the search for 'microfoundations' – improves scientific explanations. Consider causal laws: an explanatory connection is claimed to hold between cause and effect (for example, that when a match is struck, friction is the cause of ignition). However, it is always possible that we may be mistaking a correlation for an explanatory connection; or that some third variable is operative which is responsible for both cause and effect: or that the causal factor has been pre-empted in a particular case by some other determinant. Elster argues that the probability of any of these errors arising is reduced when the time span between the cause and the effect is reduced.[21] For example, we are less likely to be deceived about the relationship between friction and ignition if we possess a causal account of *how* friction causes ignition. Similarly, the claim that poverty causes crime is 'improved' if we have a microfoundational account of the causal relationship between the poverty of particular individuals and the criminal actions of particular individuals, that is, of how poverty impacts upon the properties, goals, beliefs and actions of the individual. Secondly, Elster argues that actions must be explained as the intentional achievements of goal-driven individuals simply because action presupposes consciousness, and only individuals are possessed of consciousness. The failure to recognise this drives us into that overpopulated ontological slum crowded with supra-individual entities which have mysteriously acquired their own consciousnesses.

While it is not entirely clear whether reducing the time span between cause and effect improves our chances of not mistaking correlations for genuinely explanatory connections (etc.) – it might be that the same problems would simply re-emerge at the microfoundational level – few critics of methodological individualism have had any problems with Elster's second argument. As Wright, Levine and Sober have argued, Marxists are materialists, and therefore committed to the rejection of accounts of historical development reliant upon the ascription of purposive action to supra-individual entities.[22] But, as they proceed to point out, it follows from this only that Marxists are committed to 'token reductionism': to the view that any *particular* historical event (for example, the invention of the steam mill or the French Revolution) should be explained with reference to the properties, beliefs, desires and actions of individuals. Elster's case draws much of its force from the uncontentiousness of a reductionist approach to *historiography*. But social theory is concerned with 'types' of phenomenon (such as 'technological development' or 'revolution'), not with historical 'tokens', and 'many distributions of the properties of individuals – their beliefs, desires, resources, interrelationships – can realise the same social type'.[23] If social theory is to liaise with methodological individualism, then the 'individuals' cannot be 'token' individuals – that is, particular historical agents – but must be 'type' individuals. The *methodological* individual, then, is every bit as abstract as the generic; everything hinges upon how this 'individual' is to be conceived and constructed.

This brings us back to the relationship between methodological individualism and political individualism. This relationship holds neither because libertarians are uniquely apprised of the fact that only individuals can act, nor because 'the individual' has a place only in libertarian social theory, but rather because methodological individualism has historically been associated with a particular 'type' of individual: that is, a pre-social individual, possessing desires, purposes and intentions which arise, unsullied and uncoerced, from within – 'a bundle of heterogeneous impulses which are not amenable to rational evaluation'.[24] These individuals typically meet – if they meet at all – in hypothetical places in order to make hypothetical contracts and, not infrequently, to conclude by contracting themselves out of the state of nature and into capitalist civil society and the liberal state. Objectors to Rational Choice Marxism have been quick to point out that the abstract individuals which populate its theoretical constructions bear a striking resemblance to those beloved of liberal thinkers. For example, in Roemer's work on exploitation we witness

rational utility-maximisers 'choosing' class locations and opting in and out of modes of production. As Lebowitz observes, *history* never discloses these atomistic individuals who are ontologically prior to society: 'What we have . . . is that an analyst has decided to model the individuals as if they were initially outside society, and then enter into society to exchange. The starting point . . . is not history but history mediated by an ideological assumption'.[25]

The plausibility of methodological individualism depends upon the plausibility of the model of the 'individual' developed by a particular social theorist. Those versions of the doctrine which model 'the individual' as an atomised monad are desperately implausible. In *MSM*, Elster stresses that an adequate construction of the individual must make room for relational properties (for example, 'being powerful'), because many individual properties are 'inherently relational'.[26] However, while there is a minimum social reference here, the individual is still conceived as existing outside of any *particular* set of social relations.[27] The relationship of 'being powerful' is neutral between the relationships of husbands and wives, landlords and serfs, capitalists and proletarians. Explanation appealing only to such (allegedly) transhistorical relational properties provides no account of particular patterns of social behaviour. For example, imagine attempting to explain any form of political activity (revolution, voting behaviour, etc.) as the action of 'individuals' without making any reference to their specifically social characteristics – such as their class positions. The minimal relational properties Elster allows for, obscure the *specific* social and historical relations that are at the core of Marxist analysis. The individual remains outside society and outside history, and is therefore able to weigh up the costs and benefits of contracting into particular social relationships. Alternatively, to the extent that Rational Choice Marxists have granted social predicates to 'the individual', the designation 'methodological individualism' simply becomes misleading: 'the social phenomena have not really been eliminated; they have been swept under the carpet'.[28] To be more precise, they have been swept *into* the aboriginal 'individual'.

In so far as the paradigm's supporters are committed to 'methodological individualism' as a basic presumption of adequate social-scientific practice, they are surely bound to concede that the individual is replete with social predications, and therefore cannot be properly conceived as existing in a pre-social or transhistorical state, every bit as mysterious as that peopled by generic abstractions which have assumed the properties of intentional agents. Thus, Roy Bhaskar has objected to methodological individualism because:

> the real problem appears to be not so much that of how we could give an individualist explanation of social behaviour, but that of how we could give a non-social (or strictly individualist) explanation of individual or at least characteristically human behaviour! For the predicates designating properties special to persons all presuppose a social context for their employment. A tribesman implies a tribe, the cashing of a cheque a banking system. Explanation, whether by subsumption under general laws, advertence to motives and rules, or by redescription (identification), always seems to involve irreducibly social predicates.[29]

Adequate social explanation must make reference to social phenomena. But this does not entail the reification of collective nouns; it rather leads away from the kind of voluntarist assumptions inscribed in liberal theory and endemic in mainstream social science. Human beings neither create societies, nor confront social relations as ontologically independent entities. Human beings find themselves enmeshed in pre-existent social relationships, which they reproduce, and might transform: '[m]en make their own history; but they do not make it in circumstances as chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'.[30] Transforming society is not, then, merely a fight against 'feudalism' or 'capitalism', it is an effort to exorcise the social predicates that define these modes of production. The fight against capitalism is not simply a fight against capital or a fight against individual capitalists; it is a fight for liberation from repressive predications, and *therefore* a fight against the social interests and coercive institutions which support the social structures which embody and sustain these predications.

Two points follow from this: firstly, that it is entirely appropriate for 'the social' to be prior to 'the individual' in social-scientific explanations; and, secondly, that no absurd ontological premisses are inherent in the view that socially situated individuals confront social relationships as something alien. Take the example of the manager of a large firm competing in the world market at a time of recession. She may confront the decision of whether to lay off fifty per cent of the existing workforce in order to restore profitability, the alternative being almost certain bankruptcy. Defined as a capitalist entrepreneur, she is compelled to 'decide' in favour of redundancies, and compelled to do so regardless of her desires, purposes and interests as an 'individual'. The decision to sacrifice jobs for profitability is not explained by considering the 'purposes' or 'desires' of whoever happens to be a capitalist, but by the logic of the capitalist system itself. (Of course, it might be objected that she can choose to resign: but presented with this option,

she might well ask where she could find another job, or, alternatively, point out that if she didn't 'take the decision', somebody else would be compelled to do so.) The social predication here is quite clearly prior to the 'concrete individual' in the explanatory ordering. Moreover, it would be perfectly intelligible for our manager to say that she neither 'desired' nor 'intended' to make people redundant, but did so under the compulsion of a ruthless systemic logic – she might even admit to having been the plaything of alien powers. It is not, then, the relationship between the individual capitalist and individual workers that is explanatory, but – in a sense which implies no discredited metaphysical assumptions – the relationship between capital and labour. Similarly, in the politics of gender it is not the relationship between Mr and Mrs Jones that matters, but the relationship between husband and wife which is reproduced by – and might be transformed by – Mr and Mrs Jones.

Let us return now to Elster's remark that '[t]here are no societies, only individuals who interact with one another'. This is superficially plausible because it is certainly the case that 'society' does not exist as an independent and tangible thing hovering *above* individuals. But while society is not *above* the material individual it is *before* the material individual, both because the existence of 'society' predates that of any particular individual, and because particular individuals *confront* particular sets of social relations, and often live them as oppressive and alien, even in the process of reproducing them. To begin by separating out 'the social' from the interactions of individuals, and then to proceed to deny its existence, is to surrender precisely to the temptation to conceive societies 'in terms of hierarchies, pyramids, diamonds, heaps, layer cakes, jellies, blancmanges and other party pieces of social stratification', which Alan Carling has praised the Analytical Marxists for resisting.[31] Such a conception helps to explain the affinities between methodological individualism and political individualism. The clear implication of this kind of position is that individuals are the creators of their social worlds and are capable of 'choosing' to interact in any way that they might wish. But, properly conceived, 'society' refers to the social relationships that enmesh individuals, and certainly not to a 'local maximum of cohesiveness' (a definition that is conspicuously neutral regarding the content of particular sets of social relationships).

The individual confronting the prospect of long-term unemployment if she does not sell her labour-power for poor wages, or who must sack half his workforce or allow his firm to go bankrupt, or who must get her husband's tea on the table if she does not want to be battered again, confronts 'society' as something tangible, despite the fact that it

manifests itself only through the actions of specific individuals. Sociology is concerned with the relationships between capitalist and worker, teacher and student, husband and wife, because 'the social' is inscribed in the logics of these predications. At best, then, the term 'methodological individualism' is either misleading or refers to the most trivial of truths: only actors act. More commonly, it serves as a perfectly appropriate designation for a highly implausible and ideologically resonant position in the philosophy of social science. In a recent work, Elster has insisted that methodological individualism, properly understood, is an 'essentially trivial doctrine':

> It implies neither an atomistic perspective (it grants that relations between individuals are not always reducible to monadic predicates), nor egoism (it is compatible with any specific set of motivations), nor rational choice (here again, it is perfectly neutral), nor the innate or 'given' character of desires (it is consistent with the view that desires are shaped by society, that is, by other individuals), nor finally with political individualism (being a methodological doctrine, it is compatible with any political or normative orientation).[32]

While serving as a welcome caution to anyone still expecting to encounter substantiated predicates taking the air in the local park, the truth of a doctrine as trivial as this hardly lends much support to Elster's positive programme for the reconstruction of Marxist social science.

Unintended Consequences

Elster insists that the actions of 'individuals' are to be intentionally explained, with reference only to their own beliefs and desires. He recognises, however, that it does not follow from this that aggregate outcomes necessarily realise the purposes of those individuals whose actions have produced them. Agents act in order to secure those things that they want, but they do not always get what they want; and, even where they do secure their ends, they often bring about unanticipated consequences as by-products of their actions. According to the Rational Choice Marxists, the central problem for the social sciences is to explain the mechanisms through which individuals – acting intentionally in pursuit of their own goals and purposes – bring about *unintended* consequences. Intentional explanations of individual actions are to be supplemented by two distinct, but closely related,

varieties of causal analysis: the analysis of *sub-intentional* and of *supra-intentional* causality. Social-scientific explanations, then, are to be 'three-tiered':

> Firstly there is a causal explanation of mental states, such as beliefs and desires. Next there is intentional explanation of individual action in terms of the underlying beliefs and desires. Finally, there is causal explanation of aggregate phenomena in terms of the individual actions that go into them. The last form is the specifically Marxist contribution to the methodology of the social sciences.[33]

The analysis of sub-intentional causality is not unrelated to the analysis of the phenomenon of unintended consequences, because the existence of distorted beliefs and desires often helps to explain the failure of particular agents to anticipate the probable consequences of their actions. Elster argues that there are two kinds of mechanisms which distort the formation of beliefs and desires: (1) those mechanisms producing distortions that are motivationally determined (so-called 'hot mechanisms'), for example, belief and desire formation may be distorted by wishful thinking, or in an unconscious effort to reduce 'cognitive dissonance';[34] and (2) those mechanisms producing cognitive failures of logic and rationality ('cold mechanisms'), for example, where strategic actors fall foul of the 'fallacy of composition' (see below).[35] Elster argues that Marx's distinctive contribution to the analysis of sub-intentional causation was to assume that psychic mechanisms remained constant, and to explain beliefs and desires as the (mediated) effect of the occupation of particular class locations.

Elster considers a number of instances where Marx sought to explain the generation of beliefs and desires which are functional for capitalism through the identification of 'hot mechanisms'. For example, Marx argued that the tendency of the members of a particular class to represent their interests as universal often arose as a consequence of self-deception and wishful thinking. One might be more inclined to be convinced by a libertarian conception of 'justice' – such as that advocated by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* – if one had just inherited a fortune, or made a killing in the City, than if one's prospects of surviving to the end of the week depended upon the charitable dispositions of affluent others. Similarly, the formation of desires may be distorted by assumptions concerning the range of available options. The members of an exploited class might endorse an ideologically distorted conception of 'justice', hostile to their real interests, both because – at some subliminal level – they are aware that to do otherwise would be

to add to the miseries of exploitation the terrible apprehension that there was no ultimate justification for their poverty and oppression; and also because revolt against oppression is no longer regarded as a feasible alternative when the dominant mode of production is entrenched and defended with all the means at the disposal of the modern state. These attempts to identify the causal mechanisms generative of beliefs and desires favourable to the ruling class – by appeal to psychic defence mechanisms such as self-deception and 'dissonance reduction' – represent a crucial part of what Elster regards as the legitimate heritage of Marxism. Crucially for Elster, these kinds of explanation are to be contrasted with two alternative forms of explanation which Elster has been at pains to discredit: crude functional explanations, purporting to explain the acquisition of mental dispositions supportive of the hegemony of the ruling class, simply by demonstrating that these preferences are, as a matter of fact, beneficial for the ruling class; and conspiracy theories, which view particular beliefs and desires as the product of deliberate manipulation and indoctrination

The distortion of belief-formation through the operation of 'cold mechanisms' is of particular relevance to the analysis of supra-intentional causality. The kinds of distortions arising here help to explain the failure of individuals to anticipate the consequences of their actions. Elster argues that Marx's most original contribution to the analysis of sub-intentional causality was the recognition of – and the emphasis upon – the allurements of a logical fallacy through which actors deduce invalid global assumptions from locally valid ones. Elster has declared that '[t]his is perhaps the most powerful part of the Marxist methodology: the demonstration that in a decentralised economy there spontaneously arises a *fallacy of composition* with consequences for theory as well as practice'.[36]

Consider a proto-Keynesian argument. The individual capitalist takes the 'locally valid' position that the firm's profitability will be increased if workers' wages are low. But if this *locally* valid view is generalised into the *global* statement 'low wages lead to increased profitability', then it ceases to be valid. Low wages throughout the economy decrease demand; it becomes progressively more difficult to realise surplus value; and profits fall. If all capitalists do what it is rational for them to do on the basis of valid statements (statements that are valid only when applied to the actions of a single firm), then the 'fallacy of composition' will come back to haunt them in the all too tangible form of a collapse in aggregate demand, and, consequently, steeply declining profitability and possible bankruptcy. Similarly, the fallacy of composition is central to Marx's most distinctive contribu-

tion to the analysis of capitalist crisis: the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The individual capitalist attempts to increase profitability by raising the productivity of labour and reducing unit production costs. At the level of the individual firm both these objectives can be secured by increasing and improving fixed capital (tools, machinery, etc.). It is (locally) rational for the capitalist to increase fixed capital, and to offset any decline in unit profits by lowering prices, undercutting competitors, and acquiring an increased share of the market. Indeed, the capitalist who first introduces new machinery and more efficient production techniques will enjoy a competitive advantage, and – for a time, at least – make large profits. However, when this is adopted as a global strategy the individual firm can no longer increase its market share by undercutting its competitors. Marx argues that the outcome of the global pursuit of this strategy is a downward movement in the average profitability of capitalist enterprises. In the final chapter of *ITKM*, Elster claims that 'the fallacy of composition' actually serves to identify *contradictions* within capitalism. This form of supra-intentional causal analysis, then, presents Marx's 'dialectical method' in its only acceptable form: '[w]hat Marx refers to as social contradictions correspond both to a certain type of logical fallacy ('the fallacy of composition') and to the perverse mechanisms whereby individually rational behaviour generates collectively disastrous outcomes'.[37]

The insight that aggregate social phenomena are frequently the unintended consequences of intentional actions is not, however, unique to Marxism. It is certainly not the case that Marx pioneered this methodology, or that the analysis of supra-intentional causality *per se* is a 'specifically Marxist method'. Elster recognises that the identification of supra-intentional causal mechanisms has been a central theme in capitalist apologetics. This is particularly evident in vulgarisations of Adam Smith's doctrine of the 'invisible hand': the doctrine that atomised agents, pursuing only their private advantage, will (unintentionally) bring about economic growth, increased wages, and a harmonious public order. Moreover, while the analysis of unintended consequences might possibly be one of Marx's central contributions to the development of social science, a much more direct defence of this *methodology* is to be found in the contemporaneous methodological inquiries of Carl Menger (the founder of the Austrian school of economics). In *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences* (1883), Menger addresses a key chapter to 'The Theoretical Understanding of Those Social Phenomena Which Are Not a Product of Agreement or of Positive Legislation, but Are

Unintended Results of Historical Development'. These phenomena included language, religion, law, the state, markets, competition, money and 'numerous other social structures'. Menger concludes that the most important question for the social sciences is: '[h]ow can it be that institutions which serve the common welfare and are extremely significant for its development come into being without a common will directed towards establishing them?'[38]

Two fairly obvious points need to be made here. Firstly, Marx did not pioneer this approach; it cannot be reasonably described as 'a specifically Marxist method'. It might be the case that Marx 'was one of the first to emphasise . . . [its] importance'[39], and that he was a 'pioneer in . . . [its] use'.[40] However, this hardly contributes to our understanding of the specificity of Marx's contribution, given that his fellow 'pioneers' included Adam Smith and Carl Menger. Secondly, the ideological significance of this doctrine in the works of the classical and neoclassical economists is transparent. Their problem was to explain how it was that institutions 'serv[ing] the common welfare' arose spontaneously – in short, to answer the question: 'Why does capitalism work so well?' The answer they gave was that atomised agents, pursuing their own interests in a decentralised economy, would produce all that could be hoped for in the way of public goods. What is specific to Marxism, then, is not an emphasis upon 'the unintended consequences of human action', but an alternative analysis of the systemic logic of capitalism.

Marx's specific contribution to the theoretical social sciences was certainly not the deployment of this *methodology*. When Elster describes Marx as a pioneer in its 'use', he is presumably referring to the particular use to which it was put by Marx. In particular, while Elster argues that Marx did identify 'invisible hand' mechanisms, he stresses that Marx's primary concern was with the phenomenon of 'counterfinality': the generation of *negative* externalities within *decentralised* economies. For Marx, individuals acting with reference only to their private (local) interests were not typically the recipients of unanticipated positive externalities, but were more often 'caught in the middle, between the psychic causality that shapes their aims and desires and the social causality that thwarts and frustrates them'.[41] These negative externalities arose when self-interested agents fell under the enchantment of the 'fallacy of composition'. As we have seen, Elster foregrounds the analysis of those supra-intentional mechanisms through which capitalists, pursuing locally rational strategies, produce a global decline in profitability.

But does Elster's preoccupation with the 'fallacy of composition',

and with other mechanisms which produce unintended consequences, leave any room for the general theory of history as outlined by Marx in the 1859 Preface? In *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper argues that the central concern of the social sciences should indeed be 'the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions', and he concedes that Karl Marx was 'one of the first to emphasise . . . [its] importance'. However, having made this concession he proceeds to declare that Marxism is nonetheless 'destroy[ed] . . . as far as its scientific pretensions go'.[42] For Popper 'historicism' is at the core of the Marxist programme. Popper concedes that the assault upon historicism leaves intact 'the more technical or political claims of Marxism'.[43] But he writes elsewhere that if Marxism is to be judged as a method, it must be judged to be 'very poor indeed'.[44] Marx contributed to our understanding of the structural flaws at the core of free-market capitalism; but, Popper argues, this does not support the case for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. It is historicism that informs both the glib assumption that revolution will deliver a society 'fit for men to live in', and induces the corresponding myopia to the perils of attempting revolutionary transformations of society.[45] Marx's contribution to our understanding of supra-intentional causality, then, is neither dependent upon – nor supportive of – either the general theory of history or the case for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

On the contrary, for Popper the study of supra-intentional causation possesses a definite practical significance. It provides invaluable guidance to 'piecemeal social engineers', because it increases their understanding of the long-term consequences of alternative courses of action, and enables them successfully to intervene in order to mitigate the potentially disastrous consequences of unregulated market activities. For example, Keynes clearly recognised that the uncoordinated pursuit of profits could lead to underconsumptionism, which would in turn generate economic crises. He therefore insisted upon the need for piecemeal intervention aimed not at the *abolition* of capitalism, but at securing the long-term interests of capitalists. Similarly, Elster's stress is upon the irrationality of *individual* capitalists: their proneness to surrender to a certain sort of logical fallacy. But to disabuse each and every capitalist of the 'fallacy of composition' is not to launch an attack upon *capitalism*. Elster argues that the objective of capitalists is to maximise their profit, but that capitalists adopt inappropriate means to that end. All that follows from this is that capitalists should adopt the appropriate means – which might require a certain degree of state intervention. The 'social contradictions' are overcome by casting off a logical fallacy; the site for the resolution of this contradiction is, as it

were, the *consciousness* of the owners of the means of production. This resolution might secure the resurrection of capitalism, rather than bring about its defeat.

Marxism's opponents could argue that, if Marx's attack upon capitalism hinged upon the identification of negative externalities, then this simply demonstrates his preoccupation with nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and his failure to recognise the potential for capitalism to reform itself. If Marxism is to survive as a distinctive programme for social research, then this might seem minimally dependent upon the demonstration that capitalism would be irrational even if capitalists overcame their proneness to irrationality. What is at stake here is not the rationality or irrationality of the choices made by individuals as capitalists, but of the logic imposed upon them by the predication 'capitalist'. To argue otherwise is perhaps to argue for the reform of capitalism, but not for its abolition.[46]

Rational Choice Theory and Game Theory

The Rational Choice Marxists argue that the paradigmatic form of explanation for the social sciences is intentional explanation of individual actions. But to say that actions should be explained by appeal only to their intended consequences is not to imply that actors always – or ever – realise their goals.[47] For example, it is correct to say that capitalists cut wages because they are intentionally pursuing the goal of increased profitability, despite the operation of supra-intentional mechanisms that may render this action – if adopted as a global strategy – self-defeating. Similarly, intentional explanations are not invalidated because distortive sub-causal mechanisms have operated upon belief and desire formation. It is correct to say that agents act in order to secure their goals, regardless of whether they actually achieve those goals, or even of whether they could actually achieve them. The Rational Choice Marxists typically leave to one side the problems posed by inconsistent beliefs and incoherent desires in their analyses of social interaction. Intentional explanation becomes equivalent to rational-choice explanation, which, as Elster has acknowledged, originated in the Marginalist revolution of the 1870s, was central to the development of neoclassical economics, and has recently been imported further into social theory by the libertarian Right.[48]

The basic premisses underlying rational choice theory are: (i) that actions are instrumentally rational; and (ii) that agents perform those actions because they are instrumentally rational. To say that an action

is rational is equivalent to saying that it is the best way for the agent to realise his or her goals. To be rational is to adopt the most appropriate means for the attainment of any given end, and the 'most appropriate means' is in turn to be understood as the utility-maximising strategy. We are to imagine individuals facing a 'feasible set' of alternative courses of action and choosing between them on the basis of a kind of cost-benefit analysis. We are further to assume that they do in fact act rationally, that is, that they will adopt the best means to attain whatever ends they happen to have. This approach is at the very heart of neoclassical economic analysis. For example, explanation of consumer behaviour is reliant upon models which are premissed upon the assumption that consumers in fact choose those bundles of goods which will maximise their expected utility – except where there are utility costs to making the choices which outweigh the benefits of making overly fine discriminations. The rational shopper does not spend all day calculating the exact difference in the utility gains to be had from two different brands of toilet paper, but once allowance has been made for the costs involved in shopping, he or she leaves Safeways with a trolley full of the most satisfying bundle of goods available, that is, within a 'feasible set' determined by income. Rational-choice explanations assume, then, that the actions of individuals are rational in a particular sense: actions are rational if they are the best available means for an agent to realise her goals and purposes, given whatever beliefs she happens to have. The Rational Choice Marxists have been particularly interested in a sub-species of rational choice theory known as 'game theory', which is concerned with those choice situations in which there exist complex sets of interdependencies between strategic actors.[49]

A 'game' involves a number of agents, each of whom is concerned to adopt the most rational strategy in pursuit of some given end. The classic instance of a 'game' is the two-person, one-off 'prisoner's dilemma'. The basic form of this game is well illustrated by the variant of the story that has been provided by J.L. Mackie.[50] Imagine two soldiers are manning strongposts in an attempt to hold back an enemy attack. They both have to choose between remaining at their posts or running away. They are unable to communicate with each other, so each must choose the most rational strategy on the basis of calculations about the possible behaviour of the other. If both stay, then they have a good chance of holding off the enemy and surviving the attack; if both run, then the enemy will break through, and their chances of survival will be considerably less. The best option for each is to desert his post and leave the other to hold off the attack: this will maximise the deserter's chances of surviving, but leave the other soldier with virtually no hope

of survival. Assuming that both players are rational utility-maximisers, then they will both reason as follows: if he deserts and I remain at my post, then my chances of survival are lower than they would be if I deserted too; but if he remains at his post, then my best option is certainly to desert. Both reason like this and therefore both desert. Unable to coordinate their actions, they have 'rationally' arrived at a solution inferior to the option of both remaining to repel the attack. In the absence of any coordinating mechanism, rational strategic calculation has led to a suboptimal outcome.

The Rational Choice Marxists have argued that this kind of analysis is an invaluable tool for exploring the central problems of Marxism – in particular, they have emphasised its usefulness for examining the problems that have arisen in mobilising the working class for the struggle against capitalism. The problem of collective action is conceived as an n-person prisoner's dilemma.[51] We are to assume that the working class does have a common interest in overthrowing capitalism, and further that individual workers are conscious of this interest. But it is wrong to assume that it follows from this that rational workers will participate in collective action. Each individual proletarian – assuming that he or she behaves 'rationally' – will make a strategic calculation premissed upon assumptions about the decisions that will be made by other actors. To simplify, let us imagine that she considers only two possibilities: (i) that all other actors will participate in the action: and (ii) that no other actor will participate in the action. If she assumes that all will participate, then she reasons that the action will be successful even if she does not do so. As a free-rider she can enjoy all the benefits of collective action while enduring none of its costs. If she assumes no-one else will participate, then she reasons that the action will not be successful anyway. If she storms the Bastille on her own, she will endure the high costs of being a 'sucker', but will not secure any of the benefits of a successful revolution. Despite an interest in the successful outcome of collective working-class action, the rational worker will stay at home: on both assumptions her (costly) contribution will not help to secure the sought-after benefit. In *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson argues that when a large group seeks a collective good, and there is no coercion or additional incentive structure, 'rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests':[52] '[w]hen the class-oriented action Marx predicted does not materialise, it does not indicate that the economic motivation is not predominant . . . [it is] wrong [to] assum[e] that apathy and the absence of the degree of class action that Marx expected are due to the lack of rational economic behaviour: they could logically be due to its strength'.[53]

The designation Rational Choice Marxism implies more than simply that this kind of analysis is to be imported into the tradition as a useful tool which can help to resolve some of the central strategic and theoretical dilemmas confronting socialists. It implies that such analysis should take its place at the very heart of Marxist social theory. Marxist social analysis is to be pursued through the deployment of neoclassical models: that is, of models in which rational, utility-maximising individuals confront feasible sets of alternative options and choose the most appropriate strategy to realise their ends. It is then possible to 'explain' the development of labour markets, exploitation and capitalism as the result of the choices of unequally endowed utility-maximisers (Roemer); to explain the participation of socialist parties in electoral competition, and the gradual erosion and dilution of the socialist content of their programmes, by conceiving of political parties as rational vote-maximisers (Przeworski); and to explain the failure of rational individuals to participate in class action, as a logical consequence of the rational strategic calculations of maximising agents confronting information and coordination problems (Elster *et al*).

The obvious question here is whether rational-choice analysis of 'collective action' problems can be a *defining* feature of Marxist (or, for that matter, socialist) social and political theory. The answer is that it cannot be: however useful it might prove for addressing strategic problems that confront Marxist or socialist movements, it is – in one sense at least – entirely neutral between rival social and political programmes. This kind of analysis might be of great assistance to Marxists, but it is entirely neutral regarding both the existence and the content of the collective interest. To overcome the collective action problem is to resolve a problem that is equally pertinent for any political or social movement. It is not a Marxist problem, even if it is a problem for Marxists. Similarly, Przeworski's explanation of the electoral participation and behaviour of socialist parties does not, of itself, have a specifically socialist content. Anthony Downs argued that all parties were driven towards the centre ground by the logic of electoral competition; it is unclear that Przeworski really adds much to this, except to discuss this allegedly universal phenomenon from the perspective of the history of the socialist movement.[54] Where rationality is conceived instrumentally and the optimum solution is regarded as the maximising solution, there is complete neutrality regarding both the content of ends and the question of how it is that these ends come to be pursued in the first place.

There is another sense in which rational-choice analysis is far from substantively innocent. Thus Ellen Wood rejects the claim that

rational-choice theory is a 'purely methodological strategy' and argues that 'the form of Rational Choice Marxist theory is to a large extent its substance, and in its game-theoretic assumptions are secreted vital substantive theses about the social world'.[55] These assumptions have an unmistakably liberal genealogy and include: (i) a profoundly ahistorical approach to social and political theory; (ii) an equation of rationality with instrumental reasoning that can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes's identification of 'reason' with 'reckoning with consequences'; (iii) an equation of causes of actions with reasons for actions that obscures the social construction of ends, leaves no room for the operation of false consciousness, and rests upon a conception of the individual as a self-propelling monad in pursuit of privately determined ends; and (iv) a conception of individual freedom as the attainment of whatever it might be that the individual happens to desire. While game-theoretical analyses have admittedly been deployed in order to undermine the case for decentralised economic and social arrangements, this critique is launched upon distinctly liberal premisses – coordination failures are a bad thing because they prevent individuals, indeed, individual capitalists, from getting what they want; that is, from maximising profits.

Rational choice theory is concerned with the actions of the 'rational individual'. It seeks to explain social behaviour and social mechanisms on the methodological assumption that agents do in fact act rationally, that is, that they do in fact adopt the most appropriate means in pursuit of given ends. The actions of these 'rational individuals' are to be explained purely by reference to their intentions, which are in turn conceived as privately determined sets of beliefs and desires. To explain the actions of a particular individual it is necessary to show that they were undertaken intentionally in pursuit of an identifiable goal. It is further assumed that the actions undertaken are the most appropriate means to the attainment of that goal. As Douglas Moggach has observed, on this view 'reasons, or final causes, the purpose in view of which an action is undertaken, seem to acquire the status of efficient causes, or the dynamic of action itself'.[56] If the reasons which motivate a particular action – given a particular set of beliefs about the world – are regarded as 'efficient causes', then two closely related things would appear to follow: (i) no space remains for the examination of the social construction of motives and beliefs; and, (ii) no consideration is given to the rationality of ends – the only space for the application of the concept of irrationality is those cases in which actions are informed by contradictory beliefs and inconsistent desires. To take two extreme examples: both a paranoid schizophrenic and someone prepared to

sacrifice subsistence requirements to secure 'useless' status-enhancing goods might adopt the best means to secure their ends, and act upon the basis of beliefs and desires that are fully consistent and quite coherent.

However, although one would not always realise this from reading some of the critical literature, the Rational Choice Marxists are far from unaware of these problems. For example, in *Sour Grapes*, Elster writes that social choice theory is no more than 'a useful tool for stating the problem of how to arrive at socially optimal outcomes on the basis of given individual preferences'.[57] This limited project requires only a 'thin theory of rationality' concerned with 'consistency within the belief system; consistency within the system of desires; and consistency between beliefs and desires on the one hand and the actions for which they are reasons on the other'.[58] However, Elster insists upon the need for a broader theory of rationality. In this broader sense rational beliefs are those beliefs that are well-founded given the available evidence, and rational desires are those which have developed, in some sense, 'autonomously'. To describe preferences as rational in this broad sense is not, then, to judge their content: someone may arrive at a 'true belief' by a non-rational route, and unthinking conformity may encourage the adoption of ethically desirable goals. But Elster argues that 'we may hesitate to call [beliefs or desires] . . . rational if they have been shaped by irrelevant causal factors operating 'behind the back' of the person . . . . All desires and beliefs have a (sufficient) causal origin, but some of them have the wrong sort of causal history and hence are irrational'.[59]

Elster thus recognises the limitations inherent in a 'thin theory of rationality'. He readily concedes that rational choice analysis requires supplementation through a deeper analysis of sub-intentional causation and a fuller conception of rationality. However, his position remains vulnerable to a number of criticisms. Firstly, Elster's investigations into sub-intentional causation persist in the abstraction of 'the individual' from any definite social and historical context. He signally fails to consider the impact of ideologies – and their institutional supports – upon both the construction of ends and the social formation of modes of thinking. For Elster, autonomy is compromised less by socially specific mechanisms and institutions – such as educational systems, advertisements or mass communications media – than by surrender to logical fallacies, the adaptation of preferences to possibilities, wishful thinking and inferential errors. Secondly, as Mongin has argued, deciding whether beliefs are in fact well-founded upon available evidence, and exploring the conditions under which autonomous preference formation is possible, implies an engagement with the entire project of epistemology and a comprehensive

psychological and sociological investigation of preference formation.[60] Indeed, Elster himself largely concedes that the proper business of politics is the *transformation*, rather than the *aggregation*, of preferences, and accepts that this is crucially dependent upon understanding the conditions under which autonomous preference formation might be possible.[61] Finally, Elster continues to insist upon the central importance of intentional explanations of actions, even where such explanation appeals to unexplained beliefs and desires.

There are a number of problems with intentional explanations of actions. In the first place, if we endow reasons with causal efficacy then the problem arises of how the claim for a causal relationship – or even a correlation – between preferences and actions is to be supported. There would appear to be two alternative approaches here: either (i) the causally efficacious reasons are imputed on the basis of the observed behaviour; or (ii) it is insisted that they have to be consciously entertained by the subject. If the first option is taken, then there is a danger that the putative explanations will amount to no more than strings of tautologies. We say *X* did *A* because of *B* but also that *X* possessed *B* because of *A*. For example, the action of someone withdrawing a book from the library is explained by imputing the appropriate set of beliefs and desires, but the justification for imputing those beliefs and desires is exactly the action of withdrawing the book. Alternatively, if the second option is taken, then we must place our faith in the actor's report of his or her reasons for acting, thereby ignoring the problem of 'false consciousness'. Secondly, to explain an action purely in terms of an individual teleology is to ignore the structures within which agents pursue their purposes. To say that an action is exhaustively explained by the identification of the actor's goal, is to ignore the fact that the attainment of goals depends upon the subordination of actions to the imperatives inscribed within economic and social systems:

> The fact that players persist in a game brings it about that the rules continue to be observed, but this does not explain their origination. To take a concrete example, if we consider feudalism, capitalism and a potential socialism to be very complex games involving numerous players, we can perhaps refer the strategies of these players to rational choice and maximising assumptions but certainly not the institutional matrix itself, which, if it is to be explained by the actions of the players, is in no way reducible to them.[62]

At the very least, an adequate explanation of individual actions requires the analysis of the institutional matrices that govern the processes of goal fulfilment.

There is a further problem here. Rational choice theory is not concerned with explaining the token actions of token individuals, but rather with the analysis of social mechanisms through the deployment of abstract models: the methodological individual, then, is constructed, and its goals and purposes are imputed to it as an element in the model. But when we examine these abstract individuals we discover that they are typically constructed in such a way as to be 'embodied structure[s]'.[63] The individual is defined in terms of social predications which are only intelligible in the context of specific, and historically determined, economic and institutional matrices. Thus, Ellen Wood observes that Roemer writes as if 'bondage' and 'freedom' were properties of pre-social individuals, but it is transparently clear that the operation of these predications presupposes specific social relationships.[64] Similarly, the compulsion to accumulate capital cannot be explained as an optimising strategy pursued by pre-social and autonomous individuals. That would be to confuse strategies with rules, and to ignore 'the whole historically constituted social structure which has made the individuals in capitalist society uniquely dependent on the market for the conditions of their self-reproduction, and hence subject to the imperatives of competition and accumulation'.[65]

If it is the logic of the social predications that determines both the individual's goals and the strategies adopted in order to secure them, the rubric of 'choice' becomes a merely idiomatic one. As Hindess has observed, '[i]f actors' choices are given in the logic of their situations then the insistence on choice as an alternative to structural sociological accounts is merely gestural'.[66] This point is underlined when we observe that the actors in any given category are typically conceived as being rational in exactly the same way. Capitalists are defined as profit-maximisers; socialist parties as vote-maximisers.[67] It is in fact the logic of these predications that determines the actions of agents. As Lebowitz argues, there is no reason why the dynamic properties of social structures should not be explored through the deployment of rational-choice models. For example, we might explore the dynamics of capitalism by considering the strategic interactions between worker and capitalist. This approach does not depend upon the reification of collective nouns, but is exactly concerned to explore the compulsive logics inscribed in social predications – 'epistemological priority is assigned to the determination of the structure within which individuals act', and this structure is exactly an embodied one.[68]

There is a further objection to the rational-choice analysis of collective action problems. As Ellen Wood has argued, it is somewhat doubtful that this project merits the candle:

> We learn, for example, that, since individuals are more likely to engage in action if they have some assurance that they will not be left holding the bag, organisation and leadership are needed to provide an 'indirect communication network' which will convince them 'that they will not be "suckers" in collective struggles'. This is, to be sure, a useful axiom of political organisation, but it is scarcely a startling revelation (or one that requires Rational Choice Marxist theory); and if this is the depth of insight offered by Rational Choice Marxism, it hardly seems worth the trouble.[69]

It might seem that the 'state of the art' methods often provide no more than tortuous routes to commonplace conclusions, that the neoclassical idiom can be as obscure and as strained as the dialectical idiom that the paradigm's exponents have railed against. For example, in Elster's recent *Solomonic Judgements* we might expect to find a painstaking analysis of the wisdom of Solomon that takes full account of recent developments in social scientific methodologies; for example, the rival claimants to the child might be conceived as rational utility-maximisers squabbling over the allocation of a scarce resource. Elster does not disappoint us:

> Solomon's first decision, to cut the child in half, followed the principle of absolute equality at the expense of efficiency. Usually, however, the principle of absolute equality is not applied when the good cannot be divided without loss of value . . . cutting a child in two would reduce its value to nothing. Cutting a seamless coat in four parts would reduce its value substantially. In these cases, the criterion for value reduction is that each applicant would rather have the undivided object than the parts into which it is divided, even where he gets all of them.[70]

A whole child, then, is better than both halves of a divided child *even if you get both parts of the divided child.*

Elster's recent work has in fact been marked by a retreat from rational-choice analysis and a growing disillusionment with instrumental rationality. In *Solomonic Judgements*, Elster accepts that rational-choice analysis is appropriate only to a narrow range of problems. It is not appropriate for the analysis of 'small problems'; nor is it appropriate for the analysis of 'large problems'; it is at its best when the problems are 'medium-sized', for example, the purchase of a car or a house.[71] Moreover, Elster now concedes that social norms do not shape the decisions of rational individuals, but rather pre-empt rational choices altogether.

The extent of Elster's disillusionment with rational choice theory is well illustrated in *Political Psychology*. He concedes that there is no single

homogeneous motive that explains participation or non-participation in collective action and proposes an alternative account of the genesis of revolutionary movements – with particular reference to events in Eastern Europe – appealing only to the beliefs and desires of 'individuals', and thus keeping faith with the doctrine of 'methodological individualism', while abandoning the rationality assumption. This analysis of the 'political psychology' of revolutions gives a good indication of the current state of Elster's thought.

To get the revolution off the ground, a small band of committed revolutionaries is required. This leadership may be inspired by something like the categorical imperative; it may have nothing much to lose; it may be perverse or insane; it may just get its kicks out of collective action. Be this as it may, these leaders are at least spared the indignity of being 'suckers', since they are not concerned with instrumental gains. This vanguard proceeds to gather together a motley bunch of variously motivated supporters: some are attracted by the prospect of some immediate advantage; others support the cause and believe that their contribution will be instrumentally efficacious; some are historical tourists who just don't want to miss out on all the fun – a bit of revolutionary agitation making for a welcome break from their everyday ties and responsibilities.[72]

At about this point the regime begins to get worried: it may grant concessions, or attempt to repress the movement, or both. These actions may increase the legitimacy of demands for reform or signal the weakness of the regime, but they may also increase the costs of joining the movement. Let us suppose that the net result of the regime's response is to encourage more people to throw in their lot with the revolution. For example, there will be those who are motivated by a 'norm of fairness'. This group is not concerned with the instrumental consequences of its actions, but its members are convinced that they have a moral obligation to participate so long as a sufficient number of others contribute (the relevant numbers here varying between individuals). As these fair-minded individuals come forward, the probability of a successful outcome may increase, and therefore another batch of utilitarians might arrive in their slip-stream. But these mechanisms unfortunately repel, as well as attract, participants: the historical tourists begin to get bored; the utilitarians calculate that their services are no longer required; and, presumably, as numbers decline, some of those who had been motivated by the 'norm of fairness' conclude that enough others have drifted home to enable them to do so with easy consciences. But if too many participants throw in the towel, the tide turns again: the utilitarians rejoin as numbers fall below

those required for a successful outcome; those motivated by the norm of fairness now return in their slip-stream; even the historical tourists might be expected to perk up a bit given all this excitement . . . and so it goes on. Elster concludes that 'individuals of different types attract and repel each other in an endless saraband'.[73]

This disillusionment with rational choice theory has led Elster altogether to abandon social theory in favour of the study of (predominantly) psychological 'mechanisms': in particular, psychological processes that distort the formation of beliefs and desires. In the opening pages of *Political Psychology*, he declares:

> progress in the social sciences does not lie in the construction of general theories such as historical materialism, Parsonian sociology, or the theory of economic equilibrium. The aim of such theories – to establish general and invariable propositions – is and will always remain an illusory dream. Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the alternative to nomological thinking is not a merely descriptive or narrative ideographic method. Between these two extremes there is a place and need for the study of mechanisms. I do not propose a formal definition, but shall only provide an informal pointer: A mechanism is a specific causal pattern that can be recognised after the event but rarely foreseen.[74]

Concluding his account of 'the political psychology of revolutions', he argues that this 'endless saraband' is the nearest we can get to a 'theory' of mass actions, offering an 'intermediate degree of generality' between description and full-blooded theory.[75]

Conclusion

In an earlier section it was argued that 'methodological individualism' is either a trivial or a patently false doctrine. The foundational assumptions of rational choice theory are trivial too: social science could hardly get started except on the assumption that individuals normally – if not invariably – act rationally, in the ('thin') sense that they seek the best means to realise whatever purposes they happen to have (however irrational their desires and beliefs might be). This assumption is an indispensable one if we are to make any sense of human actions and interactions: it was as important for Marx's own analysis of capitalism as it has been in the work of the Rational Choice Marxists. Everything hinges upon how the individual is conceived, and upon the theoretical level at which the analysis is conducted. We might, on this basis, identify four distinct types of rational-choice analysis.

First, there is the application of the rationality assumption to the study of particular historical episodes: for example, the English Civil War, or the French Revolution, or the rise and demise of Margaret Thatcher. No historian could begin to make any sense of these events other than by assuming that the historical agents whose actions produced them had acted in order to secure definite goals upon the basis of particular sets of, possibly false, beliefs. When, for example, Margaret Thatcher took on the National Union of Mineworkers, she did so in order to achieve a particular objective, having considered her options to ascertain which, if any, offered her the best chances of victory, without incurring unacceptably high costs. Equally clearly, no adequate historical account of these sorts of events could exclusively refer to the beliefs and desires of 'token' individuals – that is, could proceed without making reference to the contingencies of a particular historical conjuncture or the constraints imposed by the logic of definite economic, social and political structures. Moreover, no Marxist historian could be content with historical *narrative*. Any historian working within the Marxist research programme would conceive – to return to the example – the confrontation between the Thatcher government and the NUM as an expression of the perennial struggle between wage-labour and capital, as mediated by definite historical conditions. This struggle would have continued in one form or another had Margaret Thatcher never been born, and had the vanguard of the British trade union movement been the National Union of Confectioners, Milliners and Dress Designers. The recent confrontations between Toryism and trade unionism in Britain are, then, to be understood in terms of the underlying class struggle between workers and capitalists.

This leads us directly to the next level at which rational-choice analysis might be conducted: the examination of the logic of *systems* and *structures*. At this level the primary concern is not with the beliefs and desires of particular historical individuals, but with the interests that 'type' individuals have in virtue of their location within definite structures. For example, we can construct a simple model of capitalism by saying that rational capitalists – *qua* capitalists – will, given their beliefs, adopt the best available means to secure the goal of maximising profits, and that rational workers – *qua* workers – will resist reductions in their wages and increases in the length of their working day. We posit a fundamental opposition between the interests of wage-labour and the interests of capital. This model makes no reference to the properties of individuals except as the embodiments of particular class interests. Two conclusions follow when we apply this theoretical model to the analysis of definite historical events and processes. (1)

Class struggles can be expected to occur wherever rational capitalists confront rational workers – the confrontation between the Thatcher government and the NUM is, then, not to be explained as the consequence of the convergence of numerous historical contingencies, but in terms of the underlying conflict between social classes. (2) Where workers habitually comply with actions hostile to their class interests, despite having the option of successfully struggling in defence of those interests, Marxists will need to explain why it is that workers desire and believe things that are in fact hostile to their 'real' interests. No Marxist could object to rational-choice analysis at this level – this sort of analysis was Marx's central preoccupation throughout the three volumes of *Capital*. As Lebowitz puts the point: 'there is nothing inconsistent with Marxism in an approach that begins from the specification of a given set of relations of production and then proceeds to explore how the particular actors will behave rationally, giving rise to dynamic properties (the laws of motion) inherent in the particular structure'.[76] On the contrary, this sort of approach has been at the very heart of the Marxist programme since its inception.

Thirdly, there is the sort of collective action problems identified by Elster. Collective actions which are desired by large groups of rational individuals may fail to materialise, given the temptation of each to 'free ride' and the reluctance of each to get 'suckered'. Now, again, it is undoubtedly true that such collective action problems apply to all kinds of significant social phenomena. Someone who is convinced that enough people will attend the rally to ensure its success, regardless of whether she attends, may opt to remain at home in the warm, rather than marching through London in the freezing cold; conversely, should she assume that she will be the only person standing in the rain at Trafalgar Square, she will definitely stay at home, having no desire to launch a solo demonstration. No doubt such calculations not infrequently impact upon the decisions of real historical agents. But to place the analysis of such collective action problems at the very heart of a reconstructed Marxism is an entirely different matter. To begin with *coordinating* the working-class struggle against capitalism has hardly been the most pressing of the problems confronting socialists in the past decade or so. Secondly, as noted earlier, it is somewhat doubtful whether the identification and examination of these elementary problems of political organisation requires – or benefits from – the deployment of the full panoply of 'state-of-the-art' social-scientific techniques. Thirdly, such problems anyway have no distinctively Marxist content, and therefore can hardly be of *foundational* importance for the reconstruction of Marxism. To quote Lebowitz again,

'[a]ll questions of whether individual agents will find it in their individual interest to engage in collective action (to achieve class goals), all matters relating to 'free rider' problems, etc., are not the principal matter of inquiry of the collective game [that is, so far as it is of interest to Marxists]. *Epistemological priority is assigned to the determination of the structures within which agents act*'.[77] Finally, if formal rational-choice models add little of importance to the common knowledge that rational individuals may free-ride, and typically do not want to be suckered, then one might even argue, more strongly, that their deployment has actually tended to confuse the issue. According to such formal models, rational individuals will not participate in collective actions unless and until they calculate that their individual contribution will stand at the margin that marks the frontier between the success and failure of the collective project. There will, on these assumptions, be no collective actions: no demonstrations, no voting, no political activism, no revolutions. But there are.

Lastly, there is what might be called *transhistorical* rational-choice theory. This form of analysis is concerned neither with the actions of particular historical individuals, nor with the interests of the bearers of particular structural roles, nor with the collective action problems that confront political movements, but with the 'choices' of a generic individual – *the* rational individual – abstracted from any particular social or historical location. That is, this form of 'analysis' begins by identifying a set of ends and desires that are assumed to be common to all individuals, at all times and in all places: for example, that they will prefer civil peace to civil war (Hobbes); or that they will wish to secure the best possible conditions in which to pursue whatever plan of life they happen to have (Rawls); or that they have needs and wants that can only be satisfied by progressively overcoming material scarcity, alongside of the intelligence to develop and deploy more efficient technologies (Cohen). In the liberal tradition such models have been developed in defence of normative claims: for example, for Hobbes, in order to legitimise the powers of the Leviathan state; for Rawls, in defence of his two principles of justice. Both Cohen and Roemer have not only imported these sorts of models into the very heart of Marxism, but – unlike the liberal pioneers of contractarianism – have deployed them in defence not of ethical theories, but of explanatory ones: in the effort to reconstruct both Marx's general theory of history and his special theory of capitalism.

It was argued in the last chapter that in so far as the commitment to Analytical Marxism amounts to no more than a concern with 'rigour and clarity', then no-one could reasonably have any objections to it.

We might now add that if all that is involved in rational choice theory is the recognition that social-scientific inquiry could not proceed but on the assumption that individuals act 'rationally', then this too is uncontentious. Marx's model of capitalism – and every other social-scientific model – has required precisely this assumption. But, as Bhaskar has argued, the assumption of rationality – although indispensable – can never explain what actors *actually* do:

> To say that human beings are rational does not explain what they do, but only at best . . . how they do it. Rationality, purporting to explain everything, ends up explaining nothing. To explain a human action by reference to its rationality is like explaining some natural event by reference to its being caused. Rationality is, in this sense, a presupposition of investigation.[78]

The general methodological points most emphasised by the paradigm's exponents get us no nearer to identifying its specificity. As far as the rational choice approach is concerned, everything depends, not upon the rationality assumption as such, but upon the level of analysis at which it is being employed: in particular, upon the conception of the 'individual' and upon the specification of the rules of the games. If we are to get a proper grasp upon the distinctiveness of the Analytical Marxist project, then we need now to turn to a detailed examination of the substantive arguments that have been developed by its principal exponents – not least, to get a better grasp upon these methodological issues.

3

Analysing Marxism: The Coherence of Technological Determinism

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels claimed that Marx's 'two great discoveries' were 'the materialist conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalist production through surplus value'.[1] Historical materialism represented the social scientific core of Marxism: it distinguished 'scientific socialism' from its 'utopian' forebears. In a recent *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Shaw has underscored the centrality of historical materialism for the Marxist research programme: '[a]lthough scholars disagree about the degree of continuity of various themes between Marx's early and later writings, few would deny that the materialist conception of history which Marx and Engels began to hammer out at the time of *The German Ideology* (1845–46) – though not without its intellectual antecedents – constitutes that which is and was believed by them to be distinctive of their world view'.[2] The project of placing Marxism upon 'analytical' foundations therefore required an analytical reconstruction of the materialist conception of history: that is, a restatement of historical materialism which, while remaining faithful to 'what Marx wrote', recast the theory with due deference to 'those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy'.[3] This challenge was to be taken up in the opening sentences of the paradigm's inaugural work, G.A. Cohen's *KMTH*.

What Marx Wrote

In the Foreword to *KMTH*, Cohen proclaims that 'it is an old fashioned historical materialism which I defend, a traditional conception,

in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth'.[4] In a footnote, he adds that the 'most pregnant' statement of this conception is contained in Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.[5] Here Marx offered a concise formulation of the 'general result' that he had arrived at in the mid-1840s, and which was to serve as the 'guiding thread' for his subsequent studies:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of their material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.[6]

Social revolutions are fought in the name of legal, political, religious, aesthetic and philosophic principles, but the task is set, and the outcome is determined, by the 'contradictions of material life'. 'No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself.' 'Prehistory' progresses through successive epochs – Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois – which temporarily facilitate the development of mankind's productive powers, but eventually come to 'fetter' their further development.[7]

Although this is Marx's most direct programmatic statement of the general theory of history, it poses considerable problems for interpretation. In particular, we are not provided with clear definitions of the foundational concepts – 'productive forces', 'relations of production', and 'superstructure' – and the exact nature of the relationships

between these three terms is also unclear. These problems are compounded by apparently contradictory assertions in other major works – most notoriously, on the opening page of *The Communist Manifesto*, that '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle';[8] and also by the disjuncture between this bold programmatic statement and Marx's theoretical practice, as evidenced in his analysis of the systemic logic of capitalism and in his finer-grained historical work on nineteenth-century social and political developments.[9]

Cohen defends an orthodox interpretation of historical materialism known as 'technological determinism'.[10] On this view, explanatory primacy is accorded to the development of the productive forces: the relations of production and the ideological and institutional superstructure serve to facilitate this development. In particular, Cohen is preoccupied with the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production, forewarning his readers that 'there will be unusually little discussion, as books on Marx and society go, of class conflict, ideology and the state'.[11] He argues that, according to Marx's theory of history, historical development is finally explained by technological development: '*the nature of a set of production relations is explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it* (to a far greater extent than vice versa)'.[12] But Cohen is careful to distinguish between two quite different claims here: (i) whether Marx was in fact committed to technological determinism, and (ii) whether the theory of history, so interpreted, is defensible. In so far as he is preoccupied with 'what Marx wrote'[13], the target of his defence is those latter-day Marxists who have either explicitly or implicitly disavowed technological determinism. In so far as he is engaged in defending the theory, so interpreted, his discussion is primarily directed towards those of Marxism's Anglophone critics who have agreed that Marx was committed to technological determinism, but argued that it was at best false, and at worst incoherent.

Cohen's return to an orthodox historical materialism represented a significant departure when considered from the perspective of the proximate development of the Marxist programme. Technological determinism had acquired a guilt by association with the highly deterministic readings of Marxism which dominated the Second International and, after the Stalinisation of the international communist movement, the Third International. At best, it had come to be associated with the complacent evolutionism of those leading theorists of the Second International – most prominently, Kautsky and Plekhanov – who had confidently declared in the early 1890s that the inevitable 'shipwreck of capitalist production' was imminent.[14] At worst, it

conjured up darker images of the sins committed by Stalinism in pursuit of the rapid and brutal industrialisation of the Soviet Union: of forced collectivisation, hierarchical industrial and social structures, the labour camps and the purges. While it would be utterly absurd to draw comparisons between Cohen's position and the theoretical barbarisms of Stalinism, Cohen all but explicitly identifies his interpretation with that which dominated the Second International. In *Marx's Theory of History*, also published in 1978, Shaw – one-time student of Cohen, and fellow-in-arms in defence of technological determinism – explicitly acknowledges that this version of historical materialism 'seems to have enjoyed currency among Marx's early and "orthodox" followers (notably Plekhanov), although they never subjected the theory to close enough critical scrutiny'.[15] Taking this assertion at face value, Cohen and Shaw defend a reading of the Marxist theory of history which has been rejected by almost every major Marxist theorist in the intervening period, from Lukács to Althusser. Cohen's defence of technological determinism therefore marks a *return* to orthodox Marxism: to a reading of Marxism that had been more or less abandoned by Marxist theorists after the migration of serious Marxist theoretical work to Western Europe in the 1920s, and which was subjected to decades of highly damaging criticism within the Anglophone academy.

The Coherence of Technological Determinism

Cohen's insistence upon an orthodox reading of historical materialism has been shared by the theory's Anglophone critics, and is presumably directed against those Marxists who have disavowed this interpretation. Aside from some remarks concerning his relations to Althusser in the Foreword to *KMTH*, Cohen eschews any direct engagement with the work of these latterday Marxists.[16] But his defence of the theory, so interpreted, is explicitly directed at its Anglophone critics. As early as 1970, in a contribution to a symposium on historical materialism, Cohen had declared that these critics had often rejected Marx's theory of history because they failed to apply the appropriate standards of rigour and clarity as severely as they should. Cohen sought to reconstruct technological determinism, with proper regard to 'antiseptic principles of conceptual construction and empirical verification'.[17] In this sense, he was not returning to the orthodoxy of the Second International. While Cohen was committed to a somewhat modified version of technological determinism, the project of launching an 'analytical' defence of this theory was not a return to orthodoxy, but a

new departure: the inauguration of an entirely new project which sought to import into the tradition methodological constraints that were 'not native to Marxism' – '[t]he aim is to construct a tenable theory of history which is in broad accord with what Marx said on the subject. While he would certainly have found some of what will follow unfamiliar, the hope is that he could have recognised it as a reasonably clear statement of what he thought.'[18]

Marx's failure to provide ostensive definitions of the general theory's central concepts – 'productive forces', 'relations of production', 'superstructures' – and to specify the precise nature of their interrelationships, had been the principal source of reproach amongst Marxism's analytical critics. Thus, in *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History*, Bober treats Marx's posthumous submission to some astringent professorial criticism: '[t]his theory of history is expounded with a measure of recklessness of thought and with considerable confusion of expression . . . what plagues the reader most is the harvest of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions, sowing dragon's teeth wherever they fall'.[19] More forcefully, it had been argued that Marx's distinctions would remain recalcitrant to all efforts at clarification, because they were not finally clarifiable. For example, in *The Illusion of the Epoch*, Acton concludes that:

> The theory gives the appearance of being based on facts, and of being subject to the verdict of facts in the way that, say, Boyle's law is. On the one hand, the theory seems to say, there are productive forces, and on the other there are productive relationships which carry, poised one on top of the other, like the baskets of a Billingsgate Porter, political and legal relationships and ideologies. Analysis of what is being said, however, shows that the Porter is not separable from the baskets, and the baskets are not separable from one another, so that what seemed to be a wonderful feat of balancing turns out to be as commonplace as walking with one's head on one's shoulders.[20]

Technological determinism could be despatched within the Department of Philosophy, without ever reaching the Department of History or Social Science, because the claim that technological development determined historical development was not even a coherent one.

If the distinction between the productive forces and the relations of production was to be sustained, then it was first necessary to provide a definition of 'productive forces' which was neutral regarding the existing social structure, and which also made sense of the claim that these forces had an inherent tendency to develop. To begin with, Cohen challenges the common assumption that Marx included the productive

forces within the economic structure. He points out that Marx did not do so in the Preface.[21] Here he had written that the 'sum total of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society', and that these relations of production survived only so long as they corresponded to the level of development of the productive forces.[22] Cohen concludes that the development of the productive forces strongly determines the form taken by the economic structure, but that the forces are not themselves part of this structure: '[t]hey are indeed the foundation of the economy but they do not belong to the economic foundation'.[23] This is a significant point for two reasons. Firstly, if the productive forces are included within the economic structure, then this implies that they are an aspect of a historically specific mode of production: a part of the structure as opposed to an independent determinant of that structure. If technological development explains the form taken by the productive and social relations, then it ought to be possible, Cohen argues, to give a 'socio-neutral' definition of the productive forces. Secondly, if a transhistorical tendency to technological development is the determinant of epochal social transformations, then it should also be possible to give a 'socio-neutral' explanation of the tendency of the productive forces to develop.

Cohen ensures that the extensive definition of the productive forces remains neutral regarding the prevalent social form by the simple expedient of insisting that this is precisely implied in their intentional definition: these forces are 'material' *by definition*, hence nonsocial. His targets here are those critics of historical materialism – prominent amongst whom had been Bober – who have argued that, as material things are neither independently productive nor capable of developing under their own steam, the claim that social development can be explained by the independent growth of the material productive forces is patently absurd. Shaw concedes – he could hardly do otherwise – that, on this reading, technological determinism would be untenable. But he argues that this objection is in fact 'foolish and misguided': it presumes 'that Marx could offer a materialist conception of history only if material production itself were devoid of consciousness'.[24] As Cohen argues, Marx did not use 'material', in this context, as an ontological category: '[w]hether an item is a productive force depends not upon its ontology (how physical it is) but on whether it contributes to production in virtue of the material character of production'.[25] Thus, alongside of instruments of production, raw materials, and (brute) labour power, Cohen includes skills – and particularly scientific knowledge – amongst the productive forces.

Cohen's approach is best brought out by considering an example: let

us take garment manufacture. The material process of producing garments efficiently, given the current level of development of the productive forces, will require access to a range of raw materials such as cotton and dyes. It will also require the deployment of tools and machinery such as darning needles and looms, and of labour power, understood as the capacity of workers in that industry to perform useful work. But clearly neither the existence, nor the operation, of these productive forces can be understood as a mere interaction between material factors of production. The availability of dyes or looms depends upon the skills, and the scientific knowledge, of people involved in the development and production of investment goods. Nor will a single garment be produced unless the workers in that industry also possess skills: for example, the ability to operate a particular type of machine. (Cohen and Shaw also include those principles of scientific management that are required for the efficient organisation of the production process.) The central point here is that all these productive forces contribute to the production process by virtue of what might be called the physical character of that process. That so many garments of a certain quality can be produced at a particular stage of the development of the productive forces, so understood, is true regardless of the social structure within which production is actually occurring: to say that people possess certain skills, for example, is to say nothing directly about whether they are slaves, serfs, or wage-labourers.

The position is further clarified by considering two obvious objections to it. Firstly, it might be argued that scientific knowledge cannot be included amongst the productive forces because it is evidently a feature of the institutional or ideological superstructure.[26] But, as Cohen argues, science is clearly not an institution, and Marx was at considerable pains to distinguish science from ideology. The fact that certain scientific knowledge was developed, and applied to the production process, within capitalist societies is not itself any part of the definition of what capitalism is, in the same sense, for example, as the operation and enforcement of laws of free contract are a part of that definition. Thus, while socialists seek the overthrow of the capitalist state, and the dissolution of its ideological supports, they do so precisely in order that the productive potentialities – and hence the scientific advances – that have developed within capitalist societies can be efficiently deployed and further developed. The case for the inclusion of scientific knowledge amongst the productive forces is therefore a strong one on both interpretative and theoretical grounds. Why, then, has scientific knowledge commonly been relegated to the superstructure? Cohen answers that this has been a natural consequence of

the erroneous contrast between the material and the mental: science has been excluded from the productive forces simply because it is not a material thing. The second objection is that all sorts of things that are clearly social in character do contribute to production: for example, production within a capitalist society can proceed only if certain legal rules are in operation, and workers might be more productive if the virtues of hard work are regularly extolled from the pulpit. However, Cohen responds that such things have nothing whatsoever to do with the 'material character of production'. Workers use machines, raw materials and skills in order to produce things, but they do not *use* the prospect of paradise or a legal contract. Similarly, Cohen argues that whether something is a productive force cannot be ascertained by consideration of its intrinsic character, but only by asking whether it is used in the physical process of production. A wall is a productive force if it is used to harness water in order to power a water mill, but not if it serves the function of imprisoning slaves. In the latter case it enables production to proceed, but it is not used in the production process.[27]

The character of the existing productive forces, it is argued, can therefore be ascertained in abstraction from any reference to the social structure within which they are situated. But Cohen faces a further problem: to show how it might be possible to determine the 'level of development' of the productive forces without appealing to categories peculiar to a particular economic structure. At first sight, it might appear that this is a fairly straightforward matter. If at *t1* the productive forces available to manufacturers in the garment industry enable them to produce one hundred garments for a given expenditure of labour time, and at *t2* three hundred of the same garments can be produced with an equivalent expenditure of labour time, then productivity has increased threefold in that industry. The productive forces are therefore at a higher stage of development at *t2* than at *t1*. The problem arises because it is necessary to establish the level of productivity of labour throughout the economy, and this would appear to require the availability of some means of comparing different use values (and different concrete labours), and of doing so without appeal to the valorisation mechanisms that operate within a particular social formation. Clearly, this applies when we wish to compare the use values produced in different industries – for example, motor cars with textiles – but it also applies within a given industry. If one hundred garments of a particular type and quality are produced within the garment industry at *t1*, then how are we to compare this output with three hundred garments of a quite different type and quality that are produced at *t2*? What possible measure can be adopted to sum the value of all these

different products and thereby to ascertain the total product of labour? Within capitalism these aggregates are available because of the operation of the pricing mechanism within a competitive market economy. But clearly, the adoption of this measure would not give us a 'socio-neutral' standard of commensuration.[28]

Cohen seeks to resolve this problem by appealing to Marx's distinction between necessary labour and surplus labour, and to a corresponding distinction between two broad categories of product: 'indispensable means of subsistence' and 'luxury goods'. At a particular stage in the development of the productive forces, a certain amount of labour time will need to be expended in order to produce those goods that are necessary to satisfy 'the indispensable needs of the immediate producers, to reproduce the labouring class'.[29] All further productive activity will be of a 'surplus product'. (Cohen defines surplus production as that which is 'beyond what is necessary to satisfy the indispensable physical needs of the immediate producers, to reproduce the labouring class'[30].) He argues that, for the purposes of the theory, productivity can be said to have risen when there has been a reduction in the number of 'man hours per consumer per day to produce indispensable means of subsistence'.[31] This is so regardless of the amount of the remaining time that is in fact devoted to surplus production. Indeed, Cohen argues that if there is a fall in the 'man hours' required to produce means of subsistence coupled with a fall in the amount of luxury goods produced, then, 'in a theoretically central sense', there would have been a growth in productivity (even where, in another sense, less is being produced).[32]

Cohen concludes that the content of the productive forces can be identified, and their level of development measured, without any reference to the existing economic structure:

> We may envisage a complete material description of a society – a 'socio-neutral' description – from which we cannot deduce its social form. It will provide extensive information, detailing the material abilities and needs of persons, the resources and facilities available to them, their scientific knowledge. But ownership patterns, distributions of rights and duties, social roles, will go unremarked.[33]

The productive forces are therefore sharply distinguished from the relations of production constitutive of the economic structure of society. It follows from this that it should also be possible to describe the economic structure of society without any reference to the available productive forces. Cohen argues that productive forces (and persons)

are the *terms* related by the economic structure. But it is possible to identify and describe economic structures without reference to the available productive forces because these terms can be represented as variables. For example, descriptions of productive relationships would include the following: 'X is the serf of Y', 'X owns Y', 'X does not own Y', and 'X is obliged to work for Y'.[34] However, another serious problem is posed here. Cohen may have succeeded in isolating the economic structure from its technological content, and vice versa, but these relationships are surely legal or customary ones. The central problem remains of drawing the crucial distinction between the economic structure and the 'legal and political superstructure'. If this distinction cannot be made, then the claim that the 'relations of production' determine the nature of the superstructure cannot itself be coherently stated.

This problem has been a central one for Marxism's Anglophone critics. In particular, these kinds of objections have been developed by Acton and Plamenatz, who both argue that the claim that the productive forces determine the relations of production, which determine the superstructure, is either trivial, or false, or incoherent. If 'relations of production' are understood as 'work relations' – that is, those relations that must be entered into in order to operate tools and instruments – then the claim is both coherent and true, but, they argue, it is also trivial to a point which borders upon the tautological. According to Acton, the invention of a new instrument of production is also the invention of the particular work relations required for its operation. For example, if someone designs the first ship to be powered by an engine, rather than by sails, then they have also designed a new set of relationships between the crew who will operate this ship: '[v]essel and crew, contrivance and workmen, are elements in a single design'.[35] Not only is the determination of relations by forces, in this sense, a trivial one, but it is also, Plamenatz argues, one that precludes the possibility of the relations fettering the development of those forces. Work relations are bound to change when there is a change in the available technology. Alternatively, the 'relations of production' can be understood as those relations which arise because they are required if production is to occur. Plamenatz identifies two problems here: (i) he argues that a great variety of property systems will be compatible with any given form of production, and so 'it makes no sense to speak of forms of production *determining* systems of property';[36] and (ii) he asserts that it is impossible even to *define* these relations without reference to rights and obligations: '[a]ll properly social relations are moral and customary: they cannot be adequately defined unless we bring normative concepts into the definitions, unless we refer to rules of conduct which the per-

sons who stand in those relations recognise and are required to conform to'.[37] The relations of production cannot therefore be identified without reference being made to the superstructural institutions that they supposedly determine. The proposition that the system of production determines the form taken by the legal system (or, for that matter, moral and customary relationships) is not simply false, it is unintelligible.

Cohen agrees that work relations are an aspect of the material process of production, and therefore that they do not belong with those 'relations of production' which are constitutive of the economic structure. These relationships occupy an ambiguous position within the Marxist anatomy of production. Like the productive forces they are material, not social, phenomena: 'it is a material fact that Sven and Lars regularly saw logs together. That they are thus related is conceptually independent of the social roles they occupy. For all that they saw together, they might be slaves, serfs, proletarians, socialist producers, or independent firewood contractors.'[38] However, these material relations of production are not therefore productive forces. The 'productive forces' certainly include those managerial skills required in order to ensure that appropriate work relations are being employed. These skills are actually used in production and are owned by whoever happens to be the owner of the manager's labour-power. However, the work relations are not themselves owned or used: you cannot go out into the marketplace and buy a particular set of work relationships between the direct producers.

Moreover, these material relationships – *contra* Acton and Plamenatz – can fetter the productive forces. Consider Acton's own example: the change in a society's available transportation techniques, from single-manned row boats, to long canoes requiring two-man crews. Acton claims that such a technological development would necessitate a corresponding change in the work relations. But imagine that this society has a strong tradition of nautical heroism and all forms of cooperative sailing are scorned. These canoes might nonetheless be built because they are attractive to look at, or easier to make, or because they are more efficient than the old row boats even when operated by a single person; but the prevalent ideology may be sufficiently strong to forbid more than one paddler to man each canoe. Moreover, a subsequent change in this ideology might be expected to occur precisely because the prohibition on cooperative sailing fetters the efficient deployment of the newly available productive forces. Cohen concludes: 'Acton's view makes [this] inexplicable, for it entails that a shift to double manning must occur immediately'.[39] To take

another example, we might consider a case where the development of skills requires the adoption of new work relations. Imagine that new skills of scientific management have recently been developed, and are possessed by a small minority of the workforce. The efficient deployment of these new productive forces might require a change in the relations of dominance and subordination within the workplace. However, this might fail to occur because of the existing social relations. To take an extreme example, let us say that this is a slave economy. There are fairly obvious reasons why slave owners would be reluctant to purchase – let alone give authority to – persons with well-developed organisational skills. However, the most obvious example of an instance where the social relations of production prevent appropriate work relations being employed is under conditions of economic crisis, when the productive forces are left idle. There is quite clearly a disparity here between the available productive forces and the operation of those work relations that are required if they are to be employed efficiently.

Cohen distinguishes between these *material* relations of production and those *social* relations of production which are constitutive of the economic structure: these social relations of production are typically legal ones, and it is usually unobjectionable to represent social relations precisely as relations of ownership. If Plamenatz's objection is to be dealt with, the problem can only be resolved by the expulsion of legal concepts from the definition of ownership relations. What is required is 'to formulate a non-legal interpretation of the legal terms in Marx's characterisation of production relations, in such a way that . . . we can coherently represent property relations as distinct from, and explained by, production relations'.[40] Only thus can the economic base finally be distinguished from the superstructure. Unless this project is successful, technological determinism, Cohen believes, is incoherent: the analytical defence of historical materialism has collapsed at the first hurdle.

The first step in Cohen's argument is the identification of ownership with the enjoyment of rights. If X owns Y, then X has certain rights concerning the disposal and the use of Y. To take an obvious example, to say that John owns his car is to say that John alone can decide who drives it. If anyone takes the car without John's permission, then they have broken the law, and they have done so because they have infringed these rights. The next step is to notice that for every such right we can identify a 'matching power'. John has the power to decide who uses his car, and he has this power because he has the legal right to grant or withhold use of it. This right will generally be respected in a law-abiding society, and where it is not respected it will be enforced

by the agencies of the state. But while the power and the right are coincident here, they are analytically distinct. John may have the power to decide who uses the car because he terrorises its real owner and forcefully prevents her from using it. Conversely, if this were the case, then the car's real owner would retain rights over the disposal of the car, but would lack the matching powers. Cohen concludes that '[o]ne might say that the power to Ø is what you have *in addition* to the right to Ø when your right to Ø is effective, and that the right to Ø is what you have *in addition to* the power to Ø when your power to Ø is legitimate'.[41] On the basis of this distinction it is possible to provide the required *rechtsfrie* definition of the social relations of production. The proposition 'X owns Y' can be explicated, without appeal to legal concepts, by identifying the range of powers that X has over Y.

Functional Explanation

Even if all this is conceded, Cohen has shown only that the basic terms required by Marx's theory of history are analytically distinguishable. The 'productive forces' can be identified without any reference to those categories pertaining to the economic structure: and the 'relations of production' without any appeal to those categories pertaining to the 'superstructure'. There is no *necessary* relationship between these terms of a kind that would preclude the possibility of their being an *explanatory* relationship between them. However, despite the ingenuity of Cohen's arguments in support of these distinctions this achievement would be a comparatively modest one. To demonstrate that A is analytically distinct from B is to demonstrate no more than the absence of any logical prohibition upon the claim that A and B stand in some kind of explanatory relationship to one another. A patently absurd theory of history might well pass this test: for example, this is true of the proposition that the existing system of laws is determined by the birth rate. Cohen still confronts the task of offering a precise account of the nature of the relationships that are being claimed to hold here, and of offering reasons for thinking that the explanatory claims made in the 1859 Preface are 'attractive' ones.

Marxism's Anglophone critics have invariably understood the intended relationships to be causal ones. These critics have proceeded to argue that – to the extent that historical materialism is intelligible – it is clearly false. Two objections have been particularly damaging. Firstly, the relations of production have considerable impact upon the development of the productive powers. In particular, Marx argued

that capitalist relations of production impart an unprecedented stimulus to technological development.[42] The second objection concerns the transition from one mode of production to another. If the development of the productive forces is the causal determinant of epochal social transformations, then this development (cause) would ordinarily be expected to predate the social transformation (effect). However, this does not apply to the transition from feudalism to capitalism: '[a]s Marx describes the transformation, capitalist methods of production could emerge only because feudal relations of property were already giving way to others. There were no limbs to break the fetters until the fetters were broken.'[43]

These kinds of objections have often appeared to present insurmountable problems for any defence of technological determinism, leading some of Marxism's defenders effectively to abandon claims for the primacy of technological development, and to concede the importance of the 'reciprocal influence and dialectical interplay' of forces and relations.[44] Allen Wood has argued that this has resulted in the considerable impoverishment – and often the outright abandonment – of the thesis that Marx advanced in the 1859 Preface. Marxists deny that Marx was really committed to technological determinism 'because of an excessively charitable desire to rescue Marx from what seems . . . a simplistic and untenable view'.[45] Shaw underscores this point: '[t]o concede . . . that the notion of a determining factor in history is incoherent and then to argue that Marx must have something else in view is to kill Marx with kindness. Marx was surely concerned to say more than simply that the economic base is important, or that everything is related to everything else.'[46] But technological determinism does seem untenable so long as the explanatory relationships are interpreted as causal ones: given the causal efficacy of the relations of production for technological development – freely conceded by Marx himself – it is unclear what sense can be made of the claim that the level of development of the productive forces is primary, and the economic structure derivative.

Cohen rebuts such apparently fatal objections to technological determinism by insisting that the posited explanatory relationships are not causal at all, but *functional*. The level of development of the productive forces functionally explains the form assumed by the economic structure: '*the production relations are of a kind R at time t because relations of kind R are suitable to the use and development of the productive forces at t, given the level of development of the latter at t*'.[47] The productive forces, then, are primary in the sense that social structures exist in order to facilitate their development: '*[t]he property of a set of*

productive forces which explains the nature of the economic structure embracing them is their disposition to develop within a structure of that nature'.[48] The undeniable fact that capitalist relations of production have given a considerable stimulus to the development of the productive forces, far from posing difficulties for the theory, is now required by technological determinism. If the economic relations did not affect the pace and content of technological development, then their existence could not be functional for the development of the productive forces. Similarly, the overthrow of feudalism will be expected to occur precisely at that point where the further development of the productive forces requires the transition to capitalist relations of production: '[i]f the forces of what Marx called *grosse industrie* had attended the origin of capitalism, then, according to the 1859 Preface, it would have begun to sink as soon as it had been launched. There would have been no period of its rise and consolidation, no "historical task" for it to accomplish.'[49]

Two examples should serve to clarify the precise nature of this explanatory relationship. Consider the society which possesses a strong tradition of nautical heroism, effectively prohibiting the efficient deployment of two-man canoes. Cohen rejects Acton's claim that there is a straightforward causal explanation of any corresponding adaption of the work relations: this transition may be prevented from occurring because it is prohibited by the dominant ideology. The efficient use of these new vessels therefore requires the erosion of this particular tradition of nautical heroism. Given the advantages of two-man navigation, it is reasonable to suppose that the ideology will eventually adjust in order to accommodate the required work relations. This change is then explained by the development of the two-man canoes: the ideology has changed because this change is *functionally* required for the efficient use and development of the available technology. Similarly, Cohen invites us to imagine a society in which there is an equal distribution of resources at subsistence level. It is discovered that productivity can be greatly enhanced by the introduction of treadmills. There is a shortage of volunteers to operate these treadmills. Full-time treaders are initially selected by lot, but the work is so unpleasant that these reluctant treaders are inclined to shirk. Supervisors are therefore required to ensure that the new technology is efficiently operated, and consequently a class structure begins to emerge in this previously egalitarian society. Again, the introduction of these treadmills does not directly *cause* a change to occur in the productive relations – as if somehow the physical properties of these new instruments could directly bring about a change in the

social structure. New production relations arise because they are (functionally) required for the efficient deployment and development of the productive forces. It is certainly true that 'the forces . . . progress because the relations have changed;'[50] but this does not compromise claims for the primacy of the forces: 'the change in the forces is more basic than the change in relations: the relations change *because* the new relations facilitate productive progress'.[51]

The point is further clarified by considering Cohen's treatment of the relationship between base and superstructure. The architectural terminology here might seem to suggest that the foundations exist in order to stabilise the superstructure. But, once this relationship is understood to be a functional one, the converse is true. This suggests the need for an alternative understanding of the architectural metaphor. Cohen suggests a more appropriate visual image:

> Four struts are driven into the ground, each protruding the same distance above it. They are unstable. They sway and wobble in winds of force 2. Then a roof is attached to the four struts, and now they stay firmly erect in all winds under force 6. Of this roof one can say: (i) it is supported by the struts, and (ii) it renders them more stable. There we have a building whose base and superstructure relate in the right way.[52]

The picture does not display the claim that the base explains the character of the superstructure. One has to add a caption which says that when, and because, the struts would otherwise be unstable, a roof which secures them tends to be imposed. Non-metaphorically: the property relations are as they are because their being so is conducive to the initiation or maintenance of the production relations (demanded by the productive forces).

The relations of production therefore explain the existing property relations in the following sense: the property relations are required in order to stabilise those relations of production which are most conducive to the development of the productive forces. The powers required for the operation of a particular economic system might conceivably be maintained in the absence of any legal sanctions, but without these sanctions they would be vulnerable to 'winds of force 2'. The property relations comprise the 'roof' that is required if the relations of production are to be secured against 'all winds under force 6'. Those relations of production are eventually selected which facilitate the development of the productive forces, while both the institutional superstructure and the corresponding forms of consciousness adapt in order to stabilise the economic structure. The productive forces are

primary because everything else adjusts in order to accommodate their efficient deployment and development. The function of the economic structure, and of the superstructure, is to facilitate this development.

This might appear to be a highly deterministic reading of historical materialism. In particular, it is highly implausible to suggest that every feature of the economic and social structure can be explained – whether causally or functionally – as the consequence of technological development. Cohen does not argue that the precise nature and content of structure can be explained by showing that it is functional for technological development. Functional explanation is valid only relative to a 'finitely specific description' of the phenomenon which is to be explained.[53] This applies to all explanatory claims. The explosion of the boiler on Tuesday may be explained by the breaking of a valve, but this need not explain why the boiler exploded at precisely 5.30. Perhaps, while the valve was bound to have broken sometime on Tuesday, the particular demands placed on the boiler at that time of day explain why it gave out precisely then. Similarly, a zoologist may argue that a species developed camouflage as a consequence of genetic and environmental factors, but is not therefore required to explain why it developed precisely the camouflage that it did, or why different members of the species display slightly different patterns of camouflage, or even why it developed camouflage at all, as opposed to an offensive smell or taste. These explanations are in no way compromised because they do not explain phenomena at levels of specificity that they were never intended to deal with. This is equally true of historical materialism: 'The hand mill may explain why a certain society is feudal, and be incapable of explaining why tribute is mainly in labour dues rather than in kind, which might be explained by something other than facts about productive forces.'[54]

Analytical Marxism, the Dialectical Method and the Philosophy of Science

Cohen's analysis of the central concepts of orthodox historical materialism provides us, at last, with a real insight into the nature of the analytical project. Analysis emerges as something more than a commitment to the undisputed virtues of 'rigour and clarity'; it emerges as a distinctive philosophical approach, and as an approach that is dependent upon contestable philosophical assumptions. Confronting a complex totality, Cohen seeks to analyse it into its constituent parts:

'[h]e insists upon separating and isolating the different elements and aspects of the given concrete totality, and considering and defining these in isolation'.[55] If technological determinism is to be granted admission to the mainstream of social science, he argues, then it must be possible to distinguish sharply between forces, relations and superstructure. Unless Acton, Plamenatz *et al.* can be defeated on their own methodological terrain, historical materialism falls.

The productive forces are therefore to be conceived as a collection of distinct and discrete things: (brute) labour-power; the skills of shipbuilders, accountants, research scientists, dentists, plumbers, and machine minders; spades, hammers, lathes, ploughs, combine harvesters, spinning jennies, drilling equipment; techniques of labour organisation, etc. All these things are what they are, it is claimed, in virtue of their intrinsic properties: a spade remains a spade regardless of whether it is being used within a primitive society or in the most advanced capitalist economy. For the analytical philosopher the relationships which happen to exist between these discrete things are contingent and 'external' ones. It is the business of 'piecemeal' scientific investigation to determine how things are related in the world; the analytical philosopher's role is to check that any proposed theory is a coherent and testable and, hence, scientifically respectable one. If, for example, the productive forces are logically indistinguishable from the relations of production, then the explanatory claim that the level of technological development causally determines the form assumed by the relations of production cannot coherently be made.

The problems with the distinction between 'internal' (necessary) and 'external' (contingent) relations have been discussed by Sean Sayers: this distinction, he claims, is not only inconsistent with 'what Marx wrote', but is also unsustainable. The analytical approach is inconsistent with Marx's approach because analytical philosophy is necessarily 'anti-dialectical'. According to dialectical materialism, Sayers argues, the interrelationships between things are not external and contingent, but internal and necessary: that is, the parts cease to be that which they are once abstracted from the whole. Consider, for example, Cohen's attempt to define the productive forces ('content') without any reference to the relations of production ('form'). It is true that a machine will retain the same *physical composition* whether it is left idle; used at full-capacity or half-capacity; used to produce use-value or exchange-value; or, even, worshipped as a religious icon. However, machines become productive forces only within definite relational contexts: '[i]f, by "thought experiment", the social form is removed from capital, what is left is not a productive force but a mere physical object'.[56]

Cohen's own theoretical practice confirms this conclusion: the project of identifying the productive forces without any reference to their interrelationships is covertly abandoned. Whether or not a wall is a productive force will depend upon whether or not it is used in the material process of production. It is a productive force if it is used to harness water in order to power a water mill, but not if it is used to imprison slaves. It is, then, a productive force only within definite relational contexts. Perhaps, however, Cohen's position can be salvaged: the identification of a wall as a productive force (logically) depends, or so he argues, only upon its location within a complex of 'work relations' which are themselves definable in the required 'socio-neutral' terms. A wall might be used in this way within a primitive, feudal, capitalist, or socialist society. Relationships matter, then, but not in a way that compromises the crucial distinction between material content and social form.

A wall is used to harness water in order to power a mill: for all this tells us, argues Cohen, the wall might have been built by slaves, serfs, or proletarians, and the water mill might be used to supply power to small independent producers or to a multinational capitalist company. Let us assume, then, for argument's sake, that this physical process is occurring within a capitalist economy: the water mill is run for profit, and the capitalist will make profits only if she successfully exploits the labour-power of the direct producers. Those labourers hired to contruct the wall – and to operate the water mill – will therefore do so from a particular set of motives: unless the work is carried out with sufficient skill, speed and intensity, they will lose their jobs. The wall is constructed under particular social conditions, and, consequently, construction work proceeds at a certain rate and in a particular way. The motivations of participants; the speed with which work is done; the degree of supervision of labour, etc. – these are all aspects of the so-called 'material' process of production, but they are also determined by the economic and social relations within which 'physical' production is taking place. Alternatively, imagine that this water mill is an exhibit in a heritage museum. It is operated by skilled labourers: it produces power which is harnessed to drive a spinning jenny; and this machine 'produces' a low-quality fabric that is thrown away at the end of each day. Under these circumstances, the water mill is clearly not a productive force, but the *material* process here might be identical to what it would be if the water mill were being used for industrial production.

This all points to a fatal objection to Cohen's project: whether or not something can properly be designated as a productive force *cannot* be determined other than by reference to the *specific* mode of production

within which it is – or is not – being used. As Cohen readily concedes, whether or not a tool is a productive force will depend upon the use to which it is being put: if a spade is being employed in order to produce vegetables, then it is a productive force; if it is being used as a weapon, then it is not. Consider the question of whether or not a spade is to be included amongst the productive forces. Cohen answers that it should be included just so long as it is being used in order to produce something. But this condition is too weak. It does not follow from the fact that someone gardening for pleasure uses a spade to plant flowers that it is – at least, in the required sense – a 'productive force'. Crudely, we might say that within the *capitalist* mode of production the spade becomes a productive force only if it is used in order to produce *commodities*, and not if it is used, for example, by someone who just happens to garden in her free time. Clearly, the *physical* process of production might be identical in these two cases. Now, imagine that the spade is used in the process of producing vegetables which are consumed by the person who produces them. If this person is a factory worker who grows vegetables in her free time, then the spade is not a productive force: but if used, in an identical way, by a subsistence farmer to produce the means of his reproduction, then it is a productive force. It is not possible, then, to determine what is and what is not a 'productive force' other than with reference not only to 'material' work relations, but also to the 'social' relations of production.

If Cohen's distinction between the productive forces and the relations of production is finally unsustainable, then so too is the corresponding distinction between the relations of production and the superstructure. Cohen argues that the productive relations can be defined solely in terms of *powers* over the use and disposal of the available productive forces; these powers usually correspond to legal rights, but they need not do so. Someone might, for instance, maintain control over a tract of land through the exercise of brute force. If this *de facto* relationship of control were to be consolidated by granting the usurper *de jure* ownership of the land, then this, or so Cohen argues, would not create new relations of production, but affect only the *means* through which existing relationships were maintained. Miller has argued that Cohen's distinction is insufficiently sensitive to the need to refer to specific legal, social and political relationships in order to identify the specific form taken by the relations of production.

On Cohen's assumptions, we could define feudal relations of production purely in terms of relations of control over the available means of production: that is, without any reference to the *means* through which this control is exercised. An individual, then, is a feudal lord in

virtue of his *power* to appropriate the surplus labour of his tenants: either by requiring them to spend a portion of their labour-time working on his estate, or by forcing them to surrender a proportion of their own produce. The lord possesses these powers by virtue of legal and customary relationships, but his powers are nonetheless analytically distinguishable from these superstructural relationships. But, as Miller points out, Marx repeatedly dated the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England to the mid-seventeenth century – long before this time the English lords had lost the relevant kinds of control over their tenants' surplus labour:

> Until we consider the political means by which control is maintained, the commercial objectives of the controllers, and the tendencies of class positions to promote change, what we see is an economy dominated by production under long lease, in independent workshops, or in cottage industries catering to merchants. In short, we have an impossible beast, feudalism without feudal overlords.[57]

If Marx's historical periodisation – or something like it – is conceded, then the feudal relations of production cannot be defined other than with reference to how the feudal lord was able to continue – long after the extinction of corvée labour and (to a large extent) the replacement of rent in kind by money rent – to extract surplus from his tenants. For example, by 1600 tenants typically had long-term leases on their holdings, but the *terms* of these leases – which were highly favourable to the feudal overlords – cannot be accounted for other than by reference to the political powers of the feudal gentry.[58] Miller concludes that 'Marx avoids the impossible category of feudalism without feudal overlords because he characterises social relations of production by reference to political means, commercial objectives and dynamic roles'.[59]

But there is a far more obvious problem with Cohen's distinction between rights and powers. While we can concede the possibility of distinguishing between someone's control over a toothbrush, spade, car, or house, and their legal entitlement to control these sorts of things, these kinds of relationships are spectacularly disanalogous to the sorts of relationships that concerned Marx. Slave drivers, feudal lords and capitalist entrepreneurs *all* possess control over the labour-power of the direct producers; we cannot distinguish between these different relations of production except relative to the different *means* through which the powers of successive ruling classes are sustained. On Cohen's account, we might define capitalist relations of production purely in terms of the *power* of capitalists to exploit the labour-power of their

workers. But if these relationships were to be sustained by brute force, then they simply would not be *capitalist* relationships at all. An economic structure is not a capitalist structure unless the relationships of power and control are maintained within a legal superstructure supporting relations of free contract. Capitalist relations of production, then, cannot be theorised in abstraction from distinctively capitalist legal relations.

Cohen fails adequately to respond to the objections that have been raised against technological determinism by its analytical detractors. Rather than being a 'wonderful feat of balancing', technological determinism turns out to be rather more closely analogous to the disturbing chimera conjured up by Acton: a Billingsgate porter with a basket growing out of his head. What follows from this, however, all depends upon the position adopted within the philosophy of science. According to the *positivist* conception of science – explicitly avowed by Acton; implicitly conceded by Cohen – technological determinism will qualify as a genuine scientific theory only if empirically testable and predictive hypotheses can be deduced from its core propositions.[60] Should there be some internal, necessary relationship between forces and relations, then there can be no external, explanatory relationship – at least, of the required kind. Marxism's analytical critics had argued that the general theory of history was therefore unscientific. The forces, relations and superstructure could not be independently identified; the fundamental concepts in Marx's theory of history were logically related in a way that precluded any causal relationship. Other positivist critics of classical Marxism – most prominently, Popper – further argued that the theory tended to circularity in another, closely related, sense: what appeared to be bold empirical hypotheses not infrequently turned out to be mere tautologies. Consider the claim that, if the existing relations of production have become fetters on technological development, then this will bring about an 'epoch of social revolution'. This is a bold and testable conjecture only if the antecedent condition (the 'fettering' of the productive forces) is identifiable independently of the consequent 'social revolution'. Presented with this claim, the positivist social scientist will be unable to test it until she is told what level of 'fettering' will be sufficient to bring about a social revolution. But, or so their Anglophone critics claimed, Marxists simply denied that there was fettering in the required sense unless and until social revolution actually occurred. In the 1940s and 1950s, Marxism's critics argued that the general theory of history was either demonstrably false or vacuously tautologous.

This positivist conception of scientific practice, however, was hardly 'state-of-the-art' by the time that Cohen published his defence

of Marx's theory of history in the late 1970s. For all their methodological self-consciousness, the leading Analytical Marxists have signally failed to engage with recent work in the philosophy of science: the work of Kuhn, Feyerabend and Lakatos appears altogether to have passed them by.[61] The philosophy of science may occasionally have whimpered, but has remained the methodological dog that has failed to bark. Implicitly, the leading Analytical Marxists, directly engaged with critics of Marxism working within an earlier theoretical conjuncture, have unselfconsciously conceded a positivist conception of science which, while it may have been *de rigueur* forty years ago, is glaringly inadequate in the light of more recent intellectual developments.

Miller, in particular, has provided a devastating critique of Cohen's defence of technological determinism focused upon this underlying misconception of the nature of science. If scientific positivism is conceded, he argues, then Marx's theory of history – on any interpretation – would be indefensible. But it should not be conceded. Furthermore, Miller claims that the technological determinist reading of Marx's general theory – an interpretation disavowed by practically every significant Marxist theorist outside the Analytical Marxist paradigm, but common to Bober, Acton, Plamenatz, Popper, Cohen, Elster and Roemer – is both inconsistent with Marx's theoretical practice, and necessarily allied, in virtue of its monistic and causal conception of historical development, to the positivistic (mis)conception of social-scientific practice.[62] Circularity – understood as the identification of 'internal' relationships between the central explanatory concepts within a scientific research programme – is not a problem at all: 'it is typical of the most interesting scientific theories that phenomena which are connected by way of explanation are also connected, to some extent, by definition'.[63]

Miller develops this point through a discussion of Dalton's atomic theory and Darwin's theory of evolution. The core claim of the atomic theory, which revolutionised the science of chemistry in the early nineteenth century, was that new chemical substances could be produced only where elementary chemical substances combined in fixed numerical ratios.[64] Understood along positivist lines, this will qualify as a scientific proposition only if empirical evidence can confirm – or, more plausibly, disconfirm – it. On the face of it, there is no problem here: the proposal fails if it is possible to identify some chemical process where the elements fail to combine in fixed ratios, but which nonetheless creates a new chemical substance. This is precisely what Dalton's opponents did do. Dalton's response was that what appeared from the

perspective of their scientific programme to be new chemical substances were not compounds at all but only 'mixtures'. Confronted with 'counter-evidence', Dalton rested his case upon a tautology: something only counted as a chemical substance, by definition, if it was produced by the combination of elementary substances in fixed ratios. Had Dalton's theory been subjected to the attentions of scientific positivists, then philosophical fiat would have strangled modern chemistry in its cradle.

A more familiar example is provided by Darwin's theory of evolution.[65] If this 'massive Ism' had suffered the indignity of being hauled up before Ryle's 'court of law', then it too would have been convicted of non-scientificity. Consider the central proposition of the theory of evolution: 'when the selective advantages of the traits associated with new genetic material are great enough in the population, it comes to pervade the gene pool; if enough new traits accumulate a new species emerges'.[66] But this is pure tautology: '[i]n these principles "enough" in the antecedents means enough to produce the changes described in the consequents'[67] – for example, 'enough' new traits have accumulated to produce a new species if, and only if, a new species is produced. Compare this, then, with Marx's claim that if the fettering of technological development by the relations of production is severe enough, then there will follow an 'epoch of social revolution' – this is tautologous: fettering is severe enough if, and only if, revolution occurs. Miller makes no bones about the fact that the core propositions of his 'mode of production' theory are also transparently tautologous: 'basic change in economic structure occurs when the mode of production gives rise to conflicts severe enough to produce such change'.[68] As Darwin's theory of evolution, so too Karl Marx's theory of revolution.

Why have positivist philosophers of science displayed such an uncompromising hostility to the common practice of research scientists in both the natural and social sciences? The answer is, in part, that they have tended indiscriminately and universally to appeal to a particular model of the nature of scientific practice. On this view, the business of science is to make *predictions*, and to test these predictions through rigorous empirical research – experimentation, observation, etc. – aimed at the confirmation or disconfirmation of a particular hypothesis. Science predicts, then tests. But, just as Darwin's theory does not enable us to predict the emergence of a new species, Marx's theory of history does not enable us to specify in advance the conditions under which a social revolution will actually materialise. Only after the event, as it were, does Darwin's theory connect the emergence of a new species with a process

of genetic mutation, or Marx's theory of history connect social revolution with the fettering of the productive forces. Yet, while these theories are not *predictive*, they are clearly *explanatory*. It would be absurd to suppose that a general theory of history of the kind developed by Marx could or should be able to produce predictive empirical laws of the form 'when social conflict reaches degree X, there follows the revolutionary transition to a higher mode of production'. But while Marx's theory cannot make predictions, it seeks to explain epochal social transitions. It tells us *why* fundamental social transitions occur – due to contradictions between the forces and relations – and it tells us *how* they are achieved – through the medium of class conflict. Miller concludes that '[d]isconfirming the mode of production theory means showing that some rival is a superior basis for explanations of the data. The characteristic flexibility of the Marxist hypotheses neither makes such defeat impossible nor guarantees the ultimate defeat, relegation to the status of an untestable metaphysical article of faith'.[69] The Marxist programme might end with a whimper – gradually yielding explanatory terrain to some more successful rival – but it will not end with a bang – halted in its tracks because technological development reaches the nth degree and is not succeeded by the advent of communism.

If technological determinism and anti-Marxism are 'aspects of the same positivist methodology', then the relationship between analytical philosophy and positivism is not a merely contingent and historical one: they are two aspects of the same mechanistic conception of the world. The logical analyst breaks complex totalities down into their constituent parts; the scientific positivist attempts to reassemble them. Cohen's analytical reconstruction of Marx's theory of history begins by 'separating and isolating the different elements and aspects of the given concrete totality, and considering and defining these in isolation'. We begin, then, with a pile of components: here a machine, there a productive process; here a production line, there a work supervisor: here the process that produces motor cars, there a few capitalists and a lot of proletarians; here an economic relationship, there a legal one; here the productive forces, there the relations of production; and so on. The relationships between all these components are in no sense necessary and 'internal' ones – as far as analytical philosophy is concerned a capitalist structure based entirely upon the farming of yaks is not ruled out – they are instead contingent and 'external' ones. For example, the claim that there is a contingent, causal relationship between comparatively advanced technological development and the emergence of capitalist relations of production is supported if capitalist relations in fact emerge only where technology is sufficiently well

developed. But as Hume had long since pointed out, there is no warrant for such inferences. As Sayers argues, the analytical approach 'portrays things as "loose and separate", merely contingently and externally related. This is Hume's picture of the world and, as Hume himself was well aware, it leads to total scepticism, about science.'[70] Nor has Cohen's functionalist understanding of the central explanatory claims of historical materialism helped: functional explanations turn out to be valid only where they are temporary surrogates for causal explanations.

Functional Explanation Revisited: G.A. Cohen *vs.* Jon Elster

Cohen insists that acceptance of a form of functional explanation is simply unavoidable for Marxists, in so far as they are committed to historical materialism[71]: '[w]hat Marx claims to explain has momentous impact on what he says explains it. Construing his explanations as functional makes for compatibility between the causal power of the explained phenomena and their secondary status in the order of explanation.'[72] Only if the explanations are construed as functional ones can the theory be rendered coherent. If the explanatory claims are functional, then the impact of the superstructure upon the economic base not only ceases to be an embarrassment for historical materialism, but actually becomes indispensable to it. If the economic base is primary only because everything else (law, religion, the state, etc.) is to be explained in terms of its function in promoting economic development, then the kinds of logical objections raised by 'analytical' critics of Marxism – in particular, John Plamenatz[73] – simply cease to apply: their force depended upon construing historical materialism as asserting the causal primacy of the economic base.

Cohen fully recognises that merely identifying the benefits of some institution fails to explain either its existence or its actions. Crude functionalism is logically flawed: for example, the benefits of enforced property rights for a particular class are consequent upon their enforcement, postdate it, and therefore cannot explain it. One cannot move from 'indicat(ing) . . . a service the item performs as though it were intended to do so', to asserting that 'it is there *because* it performs that service'.[74] If the claim that 'the function of X is to Y' is interpreted as merely a 'beneficial effect statement', then it has no explanatory purchase. However, Cohen proceeds to argue that such claims can be explanatory under certain conditions, and therefore that the citation of consequences can figure in explanatory claims. The question is: how can

he argue this, while accepting the logical requirement that explanatory orderings respect temporal sequences?

In *KMTH*, Cohen argues that while consequences necessarily post-date the events which give rise to them, these events are nonetheless preceded by what he calls a 'consequence law'. A valid functional explanation will take the form: 'If it is the case that if an event of type E were to occur at *t1*, then it would bring about an event of type F at *t2*, then an event of type E occurs at *t3*.'[75] For example, he invites us to imagine a tribe which performs a rain dance that – as a matter of fact – has the beneficial effect of increasing social cohesion.[76] Now, the resulting cohesion cannot of itself explain the performance of the dance, because logic requires correct temporal sequencing; we cannot explain the earlier event (the rain dance) by citing the later one (the rise in cohesion). However, the relevant consequence law held before the rain dance was performed. It is the dispositional fact that is explanatory here, and not the increase in social cohesion as such. 'The condition of the society was such that a rain dance would have increased its social cohesion, and it is implied that that inferable condition occasioned the performance of the dance.'[77]

An obvious response here would be that the performance of the rain dance can only be said to have been explained when some account is given as to how the dispositional fact figures in some causal explanation of its performance. Cohen denies that this is a general requirement for valid explanatory claims, He argues that 'It is possible to know *that* X explains Y, and yet find it very puzzling that X *should* explain Y, through failure to see *how* X explains Y.'[78] This equally applies to causal explanations: someone can properly claim to know that a match had ignited because it had been struck, without knowing exactly how it is that friction leads to ignition. Similarly, argues Cohen, it was perfectly valid to explain the evolution of species by citing the beneficial effects of particular adaptive characteristics even before Darwin provided a compelling account of the mechanisms through which those effects figured in the explanation.[79] To say that giraffes developed a long neck because it enabled them to survive on a diet of acacia tree leaves is a perfectly valid explanatory claim. Darwin's theory of natural selection did not displace such functional explanations, but simply provided 'a compelling account of why [they] apply in the biosphere'.[80] The current state of Marxian social science might therefore be considered as analogous to pre-Darwinian biology. For example, according to Cohen, the generation and propagation of ideologies may coherently be explained by citing the beneficial effects they have for ruling classes, even in the absence of any compelling account of how this dispositional

fact figures in causal explanations of their generation and propagation. In this instance, Cohen detects appeals to a Darwinian natural-selection mechanism in Marx's own work – 'thought-systems are produced in comparative independence from social constraint, but persist and gain social life following a filtration process which selects those well adapted for ideological service'.[81] But Cohen is insistent that the validity of the functional claim does not depend upon identification of such a mechanism.

In his initial responses to Cohen, Elster argued that while he had no objection to functional explanations where the analogy with natural selection was demonstrable, it was impossible to take functional claims seriously unless and until the relevant feedback mechanisms – or, at the very least, some plausible candidates – had been identified. The latent functions of an institution or behaviour could explain its presence only in the narrow range of cases in which the analogy with natural selection could be demonstrated. For example, the market dominance of firms benefiting from economies of scale can be explained functionally, because it is possible to explain how the latent function figures in the explanation by developing a natural selection model of competition between firms. However, he argues that in the overwhelming number of cases in the social sciences, where no such analogy with natural selection obtains, functional explanation is illegitimate.[82] While Elster insists that valid functional explanations must be supported by some causal account of how the beneficial consequences figure in the explanation, Cohen argues that they can also be supported where 'one can point to an appropriately varied range of instances in which, whenever *A* would be functional for *B*, *A* appears'.[83] For example, it might be observed that the Hopi always perform a rain dance when internecine conflict is developing within the tribe, thus supporting the claim – which can be tested against future behaviour – that the dance is performed because of its propensity to promote social cohesion.

Since their initial exchanges, Elster has retreated from his insistence that functional explanations must be supported by knowledge of the appropriate feedback mechanisms, accepting that they might alternatively be well-founded if corroborated by a sufficient number of confirming instances. For example, Elster now allows that the consequence law which states that 'social mobility always occurs when the society is such that social mobility would enhance prosperity' might be sufficiently well-established to allow us to explain a given case of social mobility, even in the absence of any knowledge of the underlying feedback mechanism.[84] However, Elster continues to urge strong pragmatic objections against pursuing such a research strategy; to argue that

functional explanation remains a 'second-best' mode of analysis compared to causal explanation; and to insist that Marxism is riddled with naive forms of functional explanation.[85]

Central to the pragmatic objections is the simple point that in many important cases – including those discussed by Cohen – there are simply insufficient confirming instances to sustain the required generalisations. Elster argues that this is true of the central functional relationships which Cohen considers to be indispensable for historical materialism. In particular, the rise of capitalism would appear to be the only instance that Marx gives in support of the explanation of the production relations in terms of their beneficial impact upon the productive forces. This general point is conceded by Cohen at the close of his 'Reply to Elster'. He accepts that, although no methodological error is inscribed in historical materialism's functional theses, 'Marxists have not done much to establish that they are true'.[86] Cohen finally concedes that '[i]f Marxian functional explanation remains as wanting in practice (as opposed to high theory) as it has been, the foundational claims of historical materialism might need to be severely modified. Positions of great traditional authority might have to be abandoned.'[87] The disputants appear to be finally agreed that there is nothing wrong with functional explanation in principle, but that the central functional claims of Marxism are not well-established. Elster further argues that while the search for sufficient confirming instances is a formally unobjectionable research strategy, it is far better to seek out the underlying mechanisms. If only on pragmatic grounds, Marxists should now be preoccupied with identifying mechanisms, that is, with explaining how the utility of a process or institution figures in causal explanations of its presence.

In 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory', Elster illustrates his current view through a discussion of the functional claim that 'upward social mobility will always occur when society is such that it would enhance prosperity'. We are to assume that this claim is well-supported by observation. Elster argues that it is necessary to direct our attention to the specification of the underlying feedback mechanism. We might then discover that prosperity is causally related to a rise in upward social mobility because prosperity has the twin effect of buttressing legitimacy and ensuring wide opportunities for upward mobility. This improves upon the original explanation, but still fails to provide a complete account of the underlying causal mechanism. It has still not been shown that any causal relationship exists between increased prosperity and the desire to utilise the available opportunities for upward social mobility. To complete the causal account, we need to

add that the desire to rise up the social scale – rather than, for example, to fight the system – is causally related to increased prosperity, because increased prosperity causes increased legitimacy. We can improve upon a functional explanation without producing a full account of the causal mechanism, but 'the limiting case of an improved functional explanation is a causal explanation' and therefore functional explanation remains a 'second-best mode of analysis'.[88]

However, one might wonder whether Elster is right to concede as much as he does. Elster's claim – that in many important cases 'we have far too few instances to sustain a generalisation'[89] – provokes the obvious question of exactly how many confirming instances he thinks would sustain one; and the equally obvious answer that no number of confirming instances could establish a general functional claim. The idea that a consequence law (or, for that matter, a causal law) might be sustained in this way relies upon a remarkably primitive position within the philosophy of science – a kind of naive verificationism. At the very least, we might think that the search should be for disconfirming – not 'for more confirming' – instances. But if a Popperian programme is accepted, then the central functional claims, which Cohen argues are indispensable for Marx's general theory of history, are vulnerable to the objection that the evidence is, at the very least, ambiguous concerning whether pre-capitalist modes of production were optimal for the development of the productive forces.

However, Cohen's point might be differently interpreted, as claiming only that the multiplication of confirming instances increases the probability that a functional law will be explanatory in any given future case, even when we are given no account of how the dispositional fact figures in the explanation. The force of this point depends upon the strength of the analogy with causal explanations. For example, we would ordinarily say that we were warranted in claiming that friction causes ignition, even where we are unable to explain how it happens that friction brings about ignition. But how strong is this analogy? We might say here that although we do not not know how the causal relationship works, we know that there is a relationship. In the case of functional explanations, we cannot claim already to know that the beneficial consequence is explanatory. To ask how the latent function figures in the explanation is – in a stronger sense than applies to causal relationships – to ask *whether* it figures in the explanation at all. Consider how Cohen avoids the problems inscribed in the kind of 'naive functionalism' which is reliant upon the tacit assumption that pointing to beneficial consequences is sufficient for explanation, and which therefore ignores the possibility that the benefits might have

arisen accidentally (or, even where non-accidental, might be non-explanatory given the operation of some third variable). As we have seen, Cohen departs from such a position by introducing 'consequence laws' – that is, dispositional facts which are operative prior to the events for which explanations are being sought (thereby preserving the required temporal sequence). But does it not then follow that deliverance from 'naive functionalism' depends upon successfully demonstrating (in any particular case) that the relevant consequence law was in fact operative, i.e., causally operative, prior to the event that it is alleged to explain? If not, then how does Cohen finally avoid the methodological errors which, according to Elster, are fatal for 'naive functionalism'? Does the repeated occurrence of a process or event – in circumstances where it is beneficial for some individual or group – rule out, or even count against, the possibility either that the benefits have arisen accidentally, or that they are the result of the operation of some third variable? To put the point another way: if it is allowed that functional explanations can be well-established in the absence of any account of the causal mechanisms through which the 'dispositional fact' figures in the explanation, then how is it possible to make the crucial distinction between *accidental* or *incidental*, and *non-accidental* or *non-incidental* benefits?

Consider the functionalist hypothesis that the Hopi tribe performs rain dances because of the benefits of doing so in terms of increased social cohesion. Observation may confirm both (i) that rain dances are performed when there has been a breakdown in social cohesion; and (ii) that their performance restores cohesion. Cohen claims that such observations can provide empirical support for the relevant functional explanation. But how? Certainly this will be true for the crude functionalism rejected by Cohen, but on his own sophisticated version of functional explanation what is required is confirmation that the relevant consequence law is causally efficacious. It is unclear how any number of confirmatory observations linking particular actions to the production of benefits is supposed to support the claim that a consequence law of the required kind is in operation. For example, it is possible that the deprivations of the long dry season tend to undermine social cohesion; that the rain dance is always performed at the close of the dry season; and that the return of the rains restores cohesion. Perhaps empirical observations, for example, regarding the times at which rain dances are performed, could arbitrate between this sort of explanation and the theory that it is the rain dance itself which produces increased cohesion. However, it is difficult to see how observation could establish the required functional hypothesis. Consider an analogous claim: that wars

are fought in order to increase social cohesion within belligerent nations. Empirical evidence might well establish both (i) that wars tend to break out where cohesion has broken down; and (ii) that their prosecution tends to restore it. However, this evidence provides no support whatsoever for the functionalist claim that wars are fought in order to restore social cohesion.

It might be objected that functionalist explanations in biology can be said to have been well-confirmed before Darwin provided a plausible causal theory explaining how the benefits to species of adaptive characteristics figured in explanations of the acquisition of such characteristics: for example, that there were good reasons, prior to Darwin, for saying that giraffes developed long necks because this enabled them to survive on otherwise inaccessible vegetation. The problem is to figure out how, if at all, the beneficial effect statement is operative within the theory of natural selection. Presumably, the relevant functional explanation will take the following form: 'if developing long necks at *t1* will secure the giraffe's survival at *t2*, and giraffes are observed to have long necks at *t3*, then the benefits of possessing long necks will explain their acquisition'. But how does the beneficial effect statement – 'if giraffes develop long necks, then they will survive' – figure in Darwin's theory? Clearly, no hypothetical proposition of the form 'if X, then Y' impacts upon the relevant genetic processes.

It is helpful here to compare and contrast natural selection mechanisms of this kind with the selection of the 'fittest' firms – in particular, those benefiting from economies of scale – within an environment of market competition. Imagine that the size of firms were to be determined quite independently of the intentions of agents – say, to ease the argument, by random factors. Some firms just happen to be larger than others; to benefit from economies of scale; and, therefore, to survive and flourish in the marketplace. How does the relevant consequence law help to explain this? Under these assumptions, not at all. The beneficial effect statement – large firms will survive and flourish – does not, on our assumptions, explain increases in the scale of production, because we have assumed the size of firms to be randomly determined. Analogously, the possession of natural talents secures advantages in labour markets, but it is clear that these benefits do not explain the incidence or distribution of these talents. Perhaps the consequence law is intended to explain, not the existence of, but the survival of, large firms and the success of talented individuals. However, the emergence and operation of the environment – that is, of particular economic and social structures – is not itself the result of natural selection mechanisms. The conclusion to be drawn is that

functional explanations of the emergence of firms benefiting from economies of scale will be plausible only where the consequence laws impact upon the intentions of the relevant economic agents. Hypothetical imperatives of the form 'if you do this, then you will experience these benefits' will only have causal efficacy where they motivate conscious and rational actors, given the 'environmental' constraints. The conclusion to be drawn from all this might be that Cohen's sophisticated form of functional explanation cannot be supported by the identification of natural selection mechanisms, but only by demonstrating that the beneficial effect statements figure in intentional explanations of the actions of agents. Be this as it may, it will be suggested in the next chapter, that, if the Development and Primacy theses are to retain explanatory purchase, then Cohen's version of historical materialism is bound to appeal to intentional explanations – and not to natural selection mechanisms – in support of its central (functionalist) theses.

Conclusion

Even if Cohen's argument thus far were to be entirely conceded, we would have no reason whatsoever for accepting technological determinism. There would be no *logical* problem with the claim that the development of the productive forces has explanatory primacy; nor – given the abandonment of crude causal determinism, in favour of functional explanation – would this be obviously false. But we have, as yet, no reason for thinking that it is true. An obvious question presents itself: if the development of human industry is the ultimate determinant of historical development, then how does technological development exercise this dominance over economic, social and political relations? Not, according to Cohen, in a straightforward causal fashion, unmediated by the intentions of rational agents. As we have seen, he is at pains to distinguish his position from traditional versions of technological determinism: historical development is driven by technological development, not 'despite what men do', but rather 'because of what men, being rational . . . are bound to do'. But which 'men'? Who are these rational agents? Not the representatives of specific social classes acting rationally in order to realise their class interests within definite historical conjunctures: this would accord explanatory primacy to the relations of production – or, at least, to the dynamics inscribed within a definite 'mode of production'. The rational agents whose choices drive historical development, then, are not to be sought *within* history:

> Economic relations and political forms are merely 'functional' to the prevailing level of technological development: in themselves they are inactive and inert. Social processes are thus lifeless, without any independent development or internal activity of their own. The dynamic of history comes from outside history; and, without this external push, the social mechanism would grind to a halt.[90]

This is a *transhistorical* choice Marxism.

4

Transhistorical Choice Marxism: The Defence of Technological Determinism

The functional interpretation of the relationships between forces, relations and superstructures is critical for Cohen's defence of technological determinism. He had argued that this interpretation was the only one which was capable of rendering the theory consistent with 'undeniable facts, of which Marx was aware'.[1] The very survival of Marxism's central insights now hinged upon debates within the philosophy of social science. If functional explanation were to prove finally indefensible, then historical materialism, in its Cohenite incarnation, would collapse along with it. However, despite the importance of securing the theory against these apparently fatal objections, this argument is essentially a defensive one. The theory may be coherent, and it may be that it is not contradicted by 'undeniable facts', but are there any *positive* reasons for thinking that it is an attractive or plausible one? This brings us to the heart of Cohen's defence of technological determinism. He offers arguments in defence of two central theses: that 'the productive forces tend to develop throughout history' (the *Development* thesis); and that 'the nature of the production relations of society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces' (the *Primacy* thesis).[2]

The Development Thesis

The Development Thesis might initially appear to be either obviously false or obviously true. It might appear to be obviously false in view of apparent counter-examples in which the development of a society's

technology has stagnated or declined. (For example, Cohen accepts that the fall of the Roman Empire was 'accompanied by an appreciable deterioration in the productive forces of Europe'[3].) But the Development Thesis does not claim that the productive forces have always developed throughout history, only that there is a *tendency* for them to do so. Once this point is allowed, it might be thought that the Development Thesis is trivially true. The productive forces have 'tended' to develop throughout history in the sense that we might say of someone who often goes for a drink on Friday night that they tend to do so. But this is again to miss the point. To say that the productive forces have a tendency to develop, in the required sense, is not properly an empirical claim at all. (In claiming that there is a universal *tendency* for the productive forces to develop, Cohen is claiming that this tendency was present even during that period, following the demise of the Roman Empire, when the productive forces were in further decline.)[4] Conversely, it could be that the forces have persistently developed in the absence of any perennial tendency for them to do so; such development might have occurred for all kinds of different and unrelated reasons during different historical periods. We might say, then, that there is a *tendency* for X to occur when some mechanism exists that would bring about the occurrence of X, *everything else being equal*. But, in view of this *ceteris paribus* clause, the actual occurrence of X is not a requirement for a valid claim of this kind.

The bare fact that the productive forces have generally developed throughout history does not in itself support the Development Thesis, because this thesis posits a perennial tendency for the productive forces to develop. Cohen's defence therefore eschews any direct appeal to this historical evidence. It depends instead upon two claims about human nature, and one claim about the historical situation that confronts human beings. This historical situation is characterised by the presence of material scarcity: '[h]uman need, whatever may be its historically various content, is rarely well catered for by unassisted nature'.[5] People must therefore devote considerable time and energy to uncongenial productive activity. Two points are worth noting here. Firstly, Cohen is not in fact claiming that there is a *universal* tendency for the productive forces to develop. The 'historical situation' is defined in such a way as to exclude 'very lavish' environments in which there is no scarcity: '[i]n Arcadia the fruit falls from the tree into man's lap and men make no history because they do not have to – history is a substitute for nature'.[6] Secondly, it is actually rather misleading to say that the existence of scarcity is a feature of mankind's 'historical situation'. The concept of scarcity is intelligible only relative to the

(historically variable) needs and wants of human beings. This is a significant point. Cohen is not simply asserting that people do continually develop needs and wants which remain unsatisfied, or that this occurs only within definite social and historical contexts, but that this is a 'universal' – and therefore context-independent – characteristic of human beings.

The two claims that are directly concerned with human nature are as follows: (i) that human beings are 'somewhat rational', and (ii) that they 'possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation'.[7] Men and women are 'somewhat rational' in the sense that – given the desire to satisfy their wants – they will be disposed 'to seize and employ the means of satisfaction of those wants'.[8] To take a simple example, someone who needs to harvest corn will not harvest it by hand if they have access to a scythe, that is, assuming that they have the necessary skill to use the scythe. Nor will they settle for the scythe if they can get hold of a combine harvester. If more efficient production techniques are available, then they will tend to be 'seize[d] and employe[d]': and, because men and women possess intelligence, more efficient production techniques do become available. Human beings are inclined to 'reflect on what they are doing and to discern superior ways of doing it. Knowledge expands, and sometimes its extensions are open to productive use, and are seen to be so.'[9] Human beings have compelling wants and needs which they seek to satisfy; and, being rational and intelligent, they are both disposed and able to develop and employ ever more efficient means of production. All this would apply without qualification in a Hobbesian 'state of nature' in which insecurity prevented people from actually developing and deploying new technology: if Cohen's argument is conceded, then the tendency for the productive forces to develop would be present even in a society in which this development failed to materialise.[10]

Cohen concedes that this argument 'has two large gaps'.[11] In the first place, while people confront scarcity, and possess the capacity to improve their material situation, it is equally true that they typically face other problems, and that they have other interests. For example, people often have strong attachments to cultural traditions. Tradition may help to secure social cohesion and contribute to the individual's sense of identity and esteem. Similarly, individuals might devote themselves to the production of religious artefacts, rather than to the development of new productive forces, or refuse to employ the most efficient productive forces available because to do so would violate their religious commitments. Cohen concludes that '[w]hether the falsehood of the development thesis would offend rationality demands a

judgement of the comparative importance of potentially competing human interests'.[12] Secondly, Cohen acknowledges that, even if the failure to take advantage of improvements in the forces would violate human rationality, '[t]here is some shadow between what reason suggests and what society does'.[13]

In an effort to demonstrate that this shadow is 'not unduly long', Cohen appeals to the 'striking historical datum'[14] that 'societies rarely replace superior productive forces by inferior ones'.[15] This does not involve a violation of the methodological stipulation prohibiting arguments that proceed directly from empirical datum to the identification of operative tendencies. The historical evidence is being mobilised in defence of a quite distinct argument in support of the assertion that there is a tendency for the productive forces to develop. However, it is unclear why Cohen thinks the Development Thesis would be imperilled if societies rarely, if ever, did what reason suggested. The problem with this appeal to the historical evidence is that it cannot bear upon the claim that '[t]he productive forces tend to develop throughout history', unless 'tend' is understood in the trivial sense alluded to earlier. It may be true, in the required sense, that 'when knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding productive power they [rational individuals] will tend to take it, for not to do so would be irrational', despite the fact that this tendency is invariably frustrated.[16] The Development Thesis 'does not entail that the forces always develop, nor even that they never decline: circumstances may frustrate fulfilment of the tendency it imputes to them'.[17] This does not preclude the possibility that the frustration of this tendency might be the rule, rather than the exception. The appeal to the historical evidence in fact supports a rather different claim: that this tendency is not usually frustrated by circumstances. This might be thought to tell us something about the strength of the tendency, but even this does not necessarily follow: there is no reason to think that people in a country embroiled in a civil war are less disposed to develop the productive forces than people in a stable society.

The Primacy Thesis

The Primacy Thesis asserts that '[t]he nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces'. If the Development Thesis is conceded, then it follows that rational individuals have an interest in the creation and preservation of those social structures that will facilitate technological

development. But the Primacy Thesis asserts more than that the productive forces develop because material progress is in the interests of rational individuals. Firstly, it requires the further claim that only a particular set of economic structures is compatible with any given level of technological development. If all economic structures were equally capable of facilitating the growth of human industry, then the presence of a particular economic structure could not be explained by appealing to the Development Thesis. Secondly, the Primacy Thesis might be false even were it to be the case both (i) that only a limited range of economic structures was compatible with a particular level of development of the forces: and (ii) that individuals had an interest in selecting that economic structure best suited to technological development. This might be true because they possess counterveiling interests which lead them to sacrifice material progress in pursuit of other valued ends.

Cohen's rejection of the first possible source of action essentially hinges upon a single example and a substantial disclaimer. The example is the incompatibility between slavery and the development of computer technology. Cohen claims that 'the degree of culture needed in labourers who can work that technology would lead them to revolt, successfully, against slave status'.[18] But it is far from clear that slavery is incompatible with the 'degree of culture' required to make efficient use of the forces developed within feudal economies. Serfs and slaves were often required to employ more or less identical tools in order to execute more or less identical tasks. It is in the light of this fact that Cohen enters a substantial disclaimer, departing from a defence of the position elaborated in the 1859 Preface. His version of technological determinism does not claim to explain variations in the economic structures of *pre-capitalist* class societies.[19] But Cohen argues that this concession is less damaging than it might at first appear: technological determinism still explains the development from pre-class society to pre-capitalist class society, to capitalist society, to post-class society. This is 'no small claim';[20] and, while variations in pre-capitalist economic structures are not explained by the quantitative development of the productive forces, qualitative features of this development may well enter into the required explanations.

Certainly, the theory remains an ambitious one even after this disclaimer has been entered. But the disclaimer is rather more significant than Cohen allows. The nature of the pre-capitalist economic structure will surely have some impact upon the quantitative development of the forces; but, if this is allowed, then the presence of a particular set of production relations is not explained by their *optimality* for the

development of the forces. There might be an alternative structure which would significantly accelerate this development: for example, slavery might be better suited than serfdom to large-scale agricultural production. However, if sub-optimal structures are consistent with this version of historical materialism, then we are dealing here with some sort of 'satisficing strategy' and it is far from clear what this might mean when applied to the Primacy Thesis. Moreover, the Primacy Thesis, unlike the Development Thesis, is claiming that those production relations are in fact selected which favour the development of the forces; and this is a claim that should be amenable to testing against the available historical data. However, given the lack of adequate historical records concerning the transition from pre-class to class societies, and the absence of a single instance in which capitalism has been replaced by a genuinely classless society, this disclaimer leaves only a single transition that has been sufficiently well-documented to serve as a test for this thesis: the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The admission that the presence of different pre-capitalist class structures is not explained by the level of technological development would appear to weaken any presumption in favour of the claim that this applies to the rise of capitalism.

The nature of pre-capitalist class societies appears to pose another serious problem for the Primacy Thesis. Marx contrasted the phenomenal productivity of the bourgeoisie – forced constantly to revolutionise their productive forces by the ruthless systemic logic of capitalism – with the 'conservatism' of pre-capitalist ruling classes. Far from encouraging technological development, the feudal lord tends to resist those improvements that are perceived as a threat to his own long-term interests. Cohen responds that even a ruling class which often obstructs technological development may be best suited to take that development up to a particular level. The claim that economic structures are 'forms of development' of the forces is open to two interpretations: structures may be either the 'forms by means of which' or the 'forms within which' the forces develop.[21] It is this second sense which is intended by the Primacy Thesis: X may be a form of development of Y although X does not exist *in order to* promote the development of Y. For example, a constitutional monarch may 'promote' democracy although, or even because, she is opposed to democratic reform. There is another reason for describing pre-capitalist ruling classes as 'conservative'. Material progress within these structures is very slow when contrasted with the phenomenal growth achieved by capitalism. Why, then, are capitalist relations of production not selected even where surplus production remains comparatively modest? This objection is swept aside with the

glib observation that '[s]ports cars are faster than jeeps, but jeeps are faster on boggy land'.[22]

Cohen, then, argues that certain economic structures are not compatible with the efficient development and deployment of certain productive forces, but that such incompatibility cannot explain variations in pre-capitalist economic and social structures. However, even within these parameters, the mere fact of incompatibility would not establish the truth of the Primacy Thesis. The level of development of the productive forces will not functionally explain the presence of a particular economic structure – or of one of a delimited set of economic structures – unless this incompatibility is resolved in favour of the forces. For example, it might be that the interests served by the existing relations of production are sufficiently powerful to prevent the required transformation from occurring; and therefore that relations of production which 'fetter' technological progress can persist indefinitely. Cohen accepts that the required transformation of the social structure will not occur immediately, but he appeals to the Development Thesis in support of the assertion that 'the interests which conspire to support the existing order . . . will not be strong enough to sustain it indefinitely'.[23] Two points should be noted here. Firstly, this claim is not in fact supported by the Development Thesis, which asserts only that there is a *tendency* for the productive forces to develop throughout history; it is rather supported by the supplementary appeal to the historical 'fact' that 'societies rarely replace a given set of productive forces by an inferior one'. Secondly, it follows from this that a time lag should be expected between the development of a contradiction and its resolution, and that dysfunctional economic and social relations can therefore be expected to persist in the short term. The existence of these relations cannot therefore be explained by showing that they are currently functional for the development of the productive forces. Cohen responds that, in such cases, the presence of these relations is explained by the fact that they were functional for economic development in the immediately preceding historical period.

Is it Rational to Develop the Productive Forces?

Let us begin our consideration of Cohen's argument by examining the depiction of the rational individual which underwrites Cohen's defence of the Development Thesis. According to this thesis, rational individuals have both the capacity and the incentive to develop ever more efficient productive forces. Rational agents – confronted by a

'historical situation' characterised by scarcity, and concerned to minimise the amount of toil required in order to satisfy their needs – will constantly be on the look-out for better ways of doing things. Because they are intelligent, they will develop more efficient technologies; because they are rational these more efficient technologies will be 'seize[d] and employ[ed]'.

On first inspection, this claim has considerable appeal, but some reflection upon the source of its appeal serves to highlight its inadequacy. Consider the case of a solitary producer surviving upon a desert island and producing solely in order to satisfy her own needs. Presuming that she has somehow come into possession of the intelligence required to reflect on what she is doing, and to devise more efficient ways of doing it, then it is reasonable to suppose that she will devote considerable energy to reflections of this kind. After a hard day scraping away at the soil with her bare hands, she might be expected to devote her evenings to designing and constructing instruments that will make this task easier. Should she come up with a design for a spade, then, presuming that she has the raw materials and the skills required to construct and use it, it would offend rationality were she to discard it and continue to burrow away at the soil with her fingernails. In this case the advantages of developing and employing the more efficient technology redound solely to the advantage of the individual: to develop and employ a spade saves considerable labour, and might also be expected to increase the chances of a good crop. But even in the case of a solitary producer, the inadequacies of the Development Thesis are transparent. Consider the independent producer stranded upon her desert island. Let us imagine that having developed a spade and a scythe in order to plant and harvest her corn, she becomes rather more ambitious. She realises that she could cultivate and harvest each unit of corn with a considerably smaller expenditure of labour time. She could do this by farming on a much larger scale, and using the tractor and the combine harvester which she has fortuitously discovered to have been dumped upon the island. When she is finally rescued, she is annually producing thousands of tons of corn. This is unlikely to strike her rescuers as an indication of her rationality; it is rather more likely to enter the annals of psycho-pathology as a disease of the mind that overtakes people who have been stranded too long upon desert islands.

Now, it might be thought that Cohen would concur with this diagnosis. The case of the over-productive desert-island dweller would be analogous to those cases in which nature is 'very lavish'; human needs are amply catered for; and there is, therefore, no rational incentive for developing the means of production. But this is to miss the

point. We cannot decide whether the island dweller's activities are rational without appealing to the economic and social relations within which she is producing – or, in this case, the very absence of them. We already know that she is an independent producer, and the sole consumer of her output. We can therefore conclude that she does not confront scarcity and that her actions are irrational. But let us place her in an alternative set of economic and social relations. Let us now imagine that she exchanges her produce with other island producers, and also that she has a taste for meat and alcohol, but cannot produce these things on her island. The terms of trade are highly unfavourable to her, and she must produce a thousand tons of corn in exchange for modest quantities of meat and alcohol. In this case, she is confronting scarcity; her needs are not well provided for by the island; and it is perfectly rational for her to 'seize and employ' the tractor and the combine harvester. To say that nature is 'very lavish' is always to say that it is so relative to some set of economic and social relations: what is lavish land for the hunter-gatherer, might be comparatively worthless to the capitalist farmer. Cohen is right to say that where 'lavish' nature caters for the basic needs of hunter-gatherers, there is unlikely to be any historical development; yet the absence of scarcity here is not a fact about nature as such, but a fact about nature only *given* this economic and social structure: the hunter-gatherer society.

The Development Thesis does not assume that rational individuals have an interest in the development of the productive forces *per se*: that is, that their *object* in developing and employing new technologies is to maximise the aggregate social product. On the contrary, it is assumed that it is their own material interests which will lead them to develop and employ more efficient productive forces. But the fortuitous coincidence between the self-interested actions of rational agents and the imperatives required for sustained economic growth can be expected to arise only under particular structural conditions. Brenner has argued that this coincidence in fact arises only with the emergence of capitalism:

> it is only where capitalist property relations prevail, that all the economic actors have no choice but to adopt as their rule for reproduction the putting on the market of their product (whatever it is) at the competitive, i.e. lowest, price. It is only in such an economy that all economic actors are perpetually *motivated* to cut costs. It is only in such an economy that there exists a *mechanism of natural selection* (i.e. competition in the market) to eliminate those producers who are not effectively cutting costs. It is for these reasons that only under capitalist property relations can we expect a pattern of modern economic growth.[24]

It is not transhistorical facts about human nature which lead capitalists to reflect upon what they are doing, to devise more efficient ways of doing it, and to employ the most advanced methods of production; it is rather that the systemic logic of capitalism compels them to act in this way. We cannot discover either what it is rational for individuals to do, or what the aggregate consequences of their doing it will be, without reference to the economic and social structures within which they are situated. The Development Thesis is supported by the claim that it is rational for individuals to make use of the most efficient available productive forces. This is purportedly a general claim about 'human nature', equally true regardless of the particular social formation within which production is occurring. But whether it is rational for the self-interested individual to develop and employ the better technology will all depend upon 'Where you live and what you have to build with'.[25]

This point has been developed by Brenner, with particular attention to feudal relations of production. In a feudal economy neither landlords nor serfs are compelled to buy and sell goods in markets, and they are therefore freed from the imperative to specialise, to accumulate and to innovate. The peasant household's holding provides it with direct access to the means of (re)production, and therefore it is not compelled to sell either its produce or labour-power in the marketplace.[26] The serf's actions will not offend rationality – as is implied by the Development Thesis – if he or she fails constantly to innovate and seize upon the latest means of production. Indeed, it would be *irrational* for the peasant household to adopt new agricultural techniques which involved larger-scale production, and therefore required the abandonment of subsistence farming. It would not, then, be irrational for feudal serfs to dig over their plots with spades, while the combine harvester rusts away in the barn.

What about the feudal lord? The lord is also in a position to secure the means of reproduction – that is, reproduction in the style to which he has become accustomed – without dependence upon markets. While the capitalist is compelled to specialise and innovate in order to reproduce herself *as a capitalist* – failure to do so would drive her out of business – the lord can reproduce himself *as a lord* by directly appropriating a portion of the labour and/or the product of his serfs. Be this as it may, it might be thought that the feudal lord possesses a rational incentive for developing and employing ever more efficient means of production. Given that he will want to increase his level of consumption, it might be thought that he has an incentive to increase his income by increasing the productivity of his serfs during those periods when they

are required to work for him. Brenner argues that this strategy is unlikely to be adopted, because it is unlikely to be successful. If the lord does introduce advanced means of production, then their efficient employment will typically require that peasants are trained and that they work diligently and efficiently. But the feudal serf does not have any economic incentive to work efficiently, because he or she has direct access to the means of reproduction: extra-economic coercion in the sphere of production would involve feudal landlords in massive investments in supervision. It follows, therefore, that 'if they [feudal landlords] wished to increase their income, they had little choice but to do so by *redistributing* wealth and income away from the peasants or from other members of the exploiting class'.[27] They could do this either by increasing exactions from their own peasants, or by increasing the number of peasants under their control. In either case, their best strategy was not investment in more efficient means of production, but investment in unproductive means of coercion: in military retinues and equipment. The required coincidence between the self-interest of rational individuals and the development of the productive forces was conspicuously absent under feudal social and economic relations: 'the logic of the class situation of both peasants and lords [was] to *inhibit* technological development'.[28]

Is it possible to reconcile Cohen's position with the fact that feudal relations of production inhibited technological development? While this is not finally possible, it would be too quick to conclude that this account of feudalism offers a knock-down argument against Cohen. (i) Cohen does not claim that feudal relations of production are the *means by which* the productive forces develop, only that the forces *do* develop *within* them. (ii) The fact that feudal relations did inhibit technological development does not count against the claim that the feudal relations exist because they are functional for the development of the forces: jeeps are faster than sports cars on boggy land. (iii) The productive forces did develop within feudal societies. (iv) This supports the claim that rational individuals have a tendency to develop the means of production, and that this tendency was operative within feudal societies. (v) More strongly, historical materialism requires that the feudal relations inhibit technological development; it is only on this assumption that those relations can turn from forms of development of the forces into fetters. Cohen can concede that feudal relations inhibited technological development, without abandoning the Primacy Thesis.

None of these moves is unproblematic. Discussion of (v) will be postponed until the issue of epochal social transformations is tackled in

the next section. Let us conclude here by considering the persuasiveness of points (i) through (iv).

Cohen concedes that such 'productivity as occurs in pre-capitalist ages is in at least one important sense not brought about by the then prevailing production relations'.[29] However, he argues that only on a particularly strong reading of what it means to say that X promotes Y does the conservatism of non-capitalist ruling classes embarrass the Primacy Thesis. For example, the proposition that 'constitutional monarchs promote democracy' is perfectly consistent with the claim that 'a constitutional monarch is likely to be an enemy of democracy; or the still subtler view which adds that it is because constitutional monarchs tend to be enemies of democracy that constitutional monarchs promote democracy'.[30] Similarly, those who favour a minimal state because they believe that it promotes economic development do not advocate it because they believe that it *actively* seeks to promote economic development, but precisely because it does not do so. The proposition that feudal relations promote technological development is therefore consistent with the admission that neither lords nor peasants seek to promote – and may actively hinder – technological development.

But the Primacy Thesis proposes that feudal relations of production exist *because* they promote technological development, not simply that they *do* promote it. The proposed analogy with the proposition 'constitutional monarchs promote democracy' is highly misleading. For example, imagine that someone argued that a constitutional monarch's truculent opposition to moderate reform had had the unintended consequence of promoting democracy. The intransigence of the monarch had intensified opposition to the monarchy to a level at which she was finally forced to concede more radical change than might otherwise have occurred. To conclude from this that the constitutional monarch existed *in order to* promote democracy – the sort of claim required if this case is to be analogous to the Primacy Thesis – would be to indulge in the crudest form of functionalism: to move effortlessly from the premiss that X benefits Y, to the conclusion that X exists *because* it benefits Y.

This objection does not apply to the other example offered by Cohen: it may be that a 'minimal state' is in place because it is believed that the minimal state promotes economic growth. However, there is a fatal objection to this analogy. Advocates of the minimal state do believe that the minimal state promotes economic growth, in the straightforward sense that such a state is *a means* by which the productive forces develop; it is governments that are to be restrained from actively promoting development, but this is an entirely different matter.

Moreover, whereas we might explain the existence of the minimal state with reference to the beliefs and actions of individual actors, Cohen is surely not claiming that the existence of feudal relationships can be explained in this way – as if feudal relations arose because people believed that they were 'good for economic development', and then acted upon this belief.

Let us now consider (ii): the assertion that, despite the fact that capitalism encourages a faster development of the productive forces, it is better that feudal relations prevail at lower levels of economic development: '[s]ports cars are faster than jeeps, but jeeps are faster on boggy land'. The proposed analogy is once again misleading: neither sports cars nor jeeps react back upon the land traversed in the sense that Cohen argues that economic structures impact upon the development of the productive forces. Certainly, a jeep will be selected for travel over boggy land because it is (functionally) suitable for that terrain. But its function is not to improve the terrain: for instance, to flatten it out so that it will develop to a level at which it will be suitable for sports cars. It remains, at least, unclear what Cohen means when he asserts that 'though capitalism encourages a faster development of the productive forces than feudalism does, it can remain true that it is best for the forces at the time when feudalism prevails that it, and not capitalism, should prevail'.[31] If capitalism would accelerate the development of the productive forces even under these conditions, then in what sense is it 'best' for the development of human industry that feudal relations should prevail? Having asserted that people have an interest in developing the productive forces in order to conquer scarcity and satisfy their wants, Cohen now appears to be saying that this interest dictates that they opt for centuries of slow development, despite the alternative of faster development. Alternatively, Cohen might be – and I suspect often has been – read as claiming that feudal relations will develop the productive forces *faster* under these sorts of conditions. But he does not offer any argument in support of the claim that pre-capitalist relations are faster at lower levels of technological development, and therefore in refutation of the objection to which he is addressing himself.

The claim that the productive forces did in fact develop within pre-capitalist class societies is, on the face of it, an uncontentious one. The problems arise when we consider how we might measure the development of the productive forces. Reflection upon this problem reveals a curious, and highly significant, disjuncture in Cohen's argument. On the one hand, the Development Thesis states that, from the perspective of the relevant actors, the development of the productive forces is identified

with the progressive conquest of scarcity: the driving force behind historical development is the rational individual's interest in satisfying his or her historically determined needs under conditions of scarcity. On the other hand, from the perspective of historical materialism, an entirely different measure is to be adopted: the productive forces have developed when there has been a reduction in 'man hours per consumer per day required to produce indispensable means of subsistence'. It follows that the explanation of *why* the productive forces have developed is quite distinct from the explanation of *what it means* to say that they have developed: the fact that there has been economic development is explained by appealing to the interests of rational individuals; but the *proposition* that there has been economic development makes no direct appeal to those interests.[32]

It would, at the very least, strengthen Cohen's argument if this disjuncture were to be eliminated. This would require arguments in support of either one of the following claims: (i) that rational agents were driven by some transhistorical interest in reducing the expenditure of labour-time required to produce the indispensable means of subsistence; or (ii) that the satisfaction of human needs under conditions of scarcity could provide an independent measure of the growth of the productive forces. It is precisely because both these claims are incredible that Cohen is driven to resolve the problem in such a strained way. The implausibility of (i) is more or less self-evident. The kind of wild counter-factuals that would have to obtain in order for historical individuals to make this an object of their endeavours requires no elaboration. The problems with (ii) are less self-evident, but also insurmountable. It is not simply that human needs are historically variable – as Marx argued, the modern worker has needs that would not even have occurred to the medieval peasant – but also that these needs are inextricably bound up with the prevalent relations of production. As Wright and Levine have argued, even if we imagine that the feudal lord does invest in improving the agrarian means of production, we cannot conclude that he does so *because* of some rational interest in improving the productive forces in order to overcome 'natural' scarcity.[33] He does so because he needs to pay retainers, buy military equipment, and maintain his status through ostentatious consumption: that is, because he confronts 'scarcity' relative to needs that have arisen as an indirect consequence of the feudal relations of production themselves. Thus, Wright and Levine conclude that 'contrary to what Cohen maintains, relations of production condition the development of the productive forces, not because they allow for the translation of universal rationality into historically specific 'moments', but in virtue of

the imposition of class specific rationalities and forms of scarcity'.[34]

In attempting to provide a neutral measure of technological development, Cohen appeals to those subsistence needs which are not dependent upon the level of development obtained by the productive forces, or upon the existing relations of production. Cohen offers the following 'socio-neutral' solution to this problem: 'The development of the productive forces may be identified with the growth in the surplus they make possible, and this in turn may be identified with the amount of the day which remains after the labouring required to maintain the producers has been subtracted.'[35] But how much labour-time is required to maintain the desert island producer whom we considered earlier in this chapter? If she farms for subsistence, it might be only two hours a day. But if she farms for exchange, it might be twice as much: everything depends upon the relations of production within which she is producing.[36] As Callinicos has argued, it will be impossible to determine how much of the day someone needs to labour in order to secure their subsistence requirements without knowing, for example, whether or not they own and control the means of production and consume their own produce, or must buy subsistence goods, at market-determined prices, with wages received for the sale of their labour-power, and at wage-rates not infrequently determined in the course of negotiations between trade unions and employers.[37]

Let us now turn to (iv): the proposition that the development of the productive forces within feudalism supports the claim that the tendency of rational individuals to develop the means of production was fulfilled within feudal societies. Leaving aside the problems of deciding how development is to be measured, it was argued in a previous section that the fact that the productive forces have developed throughout history could not support the claim that they have a *tendency* to do so. Although Cohen seems to think that this 'striking historical datum' supports the claims about human nature offered in defence of the Development Thesis, this supposition would contradict his own analysis of the logic of propositions asserting a tendency for X to occur: tendencies can be frustrated, and something can consistently occur although there is no tendency for it to occur. The appeal to historical evidence is in fact intended to support the quite different claim that 'the shadow between what reason suggests and what society does . . . is not unduly long': that the tendency for rational individuals to develop the productive forces is not usually frustrated. However, if the historical evidence does not support the claim that there is a tendency for the productive forces to develop, it can hardly support the claim that this tendency is not usually frustrated. The appeal to this historical evidence

in support of the Development Thesis appears to be circular after all. Cohen sets out to explain *why* it is that the productive forces have developed – offering an explanation appealing to alleged facts about human nature – but then he argues that this explanation is supported by the very fact that it is supposedly explaining: the development of the forces.[38]

The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

The Development Thesis does not provide a remotely plausible explanation of the development of the means of production within either feudalism or capitalism. But it might be thought that it could nonetheless be mobilised in the course of an explanation of the *transition* from feudalism to capitalism. Even if it is conceded both (i) that technological development within a given mode of production is not driven by the transhistorical interests of rational individuals, but rather by the systemic logic of the prevalent economic structure; and (ii) that feudalism systematically inhibited economic development, it might still be argued that the transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred because capitalist economic and social relations were required if the forces were to be released from their 'fetters'. The Development Thesis might be required for an adequate explanation of the rise of capitalism, regardless of whether or not it could explain the actions of rational individuals within capitalism. The problems with this are fairly self-evident. If Cohen is to offer anything other than a contractarian explanation of this transition, then he must provide some causal-cum-intentional explanation of how it is that this allegedly transhistorical interest in the development of the forces comes to coincide with the interests of individuals who are enmeshed within feudal relations of production.

Cohen argues that productive forces developed within feudal society which were incompatible with the existing relations of production. In the countryside the development of modern methods of tillage depended upon large-scale cultivation and required fewer tillers. These methods of production were incompatible with feudal relations of production, both because the existence of peasant smallholdings was an obstacle to large-scale cultivation, and because a much smaller workforce was now required for efficient agricultural production. Similarly, the guild structure in the towns impeded the development and employment of more efficient manufacturing techniques, because the guild structure prohibited the required levels of

labour mobility and concentration.[39] The development of the productive forces brought about the required *incompatibility* between forces and relations of production. Feudal relations became fetters upon the development of the productive forces, not primarily in the sense that existing productive forces were left idle, but rather because feudal relations prevented new forces being efficiently employed.

We can concede that this incompatibility did arise without surrendering the point that feudal relations systematically impeded the development of the productive forces. We might say that the possibility of employing new methods of production arose *in spite of* the feudal relations of production. But this reveals another interesting disjuncture: this time concerning the claims about human nature which underwrite the Development Thesis. Cohen's critics have typically attacked the claim that rational individuals have an incentive to 'seize and employ' the most efficient means of production, and have done so for the reasons elaborated in the preceding section: whether it is in someone's self-interest that the most efficient means of production are seized and employed depends upon their location within the existing economic structure. It is often, and quite wrongly, assumed to follow from this that there is no transhistorical tendency for new methods of production to become available for use. If the distinction between science and ideology is granted, then we can conceive of science as having a history which is, to some significant degree, independent of the mode of production. There may be a general tendency for *some* men and women to devise more efficient ways of doing things: a tendency that is, in a certain sense, *transhistorical*.

This helps to explain the initial appeal of the Development Thesis. Moreover, once it is granted that not all methods of production are compatible with all economic and social structures – for example, that slavery is incompatible with computer technology – then it follows that there is a transhistorical tendency for contradictions to emerge between the prevailing relations of production and the available productive forces. It might therefore be concluded that the contradiction between feudal relations of production and the development of the more efficient agricultural and industrial technologies which became available within feudal societies was more or less bound to arise in some form. But the operation of this tendency would offer no reasons whatever for supporting the Primacy Thesis. The tendency to innovate in this sense would encourage the development of the productive forces *regardless* of the economic and social structure; the Primacy Thesis asserts that the relations of production exist *in order* to promote technological development. More significantly, incompatibility is not a

sufficient condition for the truth of the Primacy Thesis: '[i]f high technology rules out slavery, then slavery rules out high technology'.[40] What must be 'added' here is that, where incompatibility arises, the resulting contradiction is 'resolved by alteration of the productive relations'.[41] The Primacy Thesis requires that human beings are disposed to devise better ways of doing things *and* that they are disposed to seize and employ the most efficient available means of production.

Cohen's account of the emergence of capitalism is contained in just one terse paragraph:

> Marx asks how a capitalist class, owning means of production, comes to face a proletariat, owning nothing but labour power. He finds the 'secret' answer in the expropriation of a more or less independent peasantry from the soil. Expropriation was variously achieved, but notably by acts of enclosure, which were motivated in large part by new commercial opportunities, including the florescence of a wool trade which made sheep farming, with its low labour requirements, more profitable, in many cases, than agriculture. Expropriation was also encouraged by improved techniques of cultivation. Fewer tillers of the soil were now needed, and redundant peasants were dispossessed.[42]

The expropriation of the peasantry is explained by identifying an incompatibility between feudal relations of production and new opportunities for profitable investment in less labour-intensive farming. But this begs the question by assuming the pre-existence of those very economic relations the emergence of which needs to be explained. Cohen is supposedly offering an explanation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but he argues that new farming methods were adopted because they were more *profitable*. This assumes that the relentless logic inscribed within capitalist relations is already in operation; the feudal lord abandons feudal relations because they are no longer profitable. There is another problem here. Let us imagine that the feudal lord does indeed want to invest in less labour-intensive production, and therefore that he has an incentive for appropriating the smallholdings of his peasants. The emergence of a dispossessed peasantry does not follow from this. Whether the peasants are dispossessed or not will depend upon whether the lords have sufficient political power to expropriate the means of reproduction from an understandably recalcitrant peasantry: that is, upon the capacity of rival classes to realise their interests within a particular historical conjuncture.

The problems with Cohen's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism are highlighted by a comparison with the work of Robert Brenner. During the mid-1970s, Brenner developed a hugely influential

account of the emergence of capitalism which was later to inform an important critique of Cohen's defence of technological determinism. In 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' and 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', Brenner argued that the transition from feudalism to capitalism had not been mandated by transhistorical laws of development, but could only be understood through a careful analysis of the exigencies of class struggles occurring within definite and varied historical contexts.[43]

Brenner is centrally concerned with class capacities. It had frequently been argued that the Malthusian cycle, which produced periodic booms and slumps in the peasant population, could explain the shifts in the balance of economic and social power between lords and peasants. Brenner objects to this account of feudal class struggle for three related reasons. Firstly, this model presumes the operation of a market, by assuming that the balance of power between lords and peasants is straightforwardly dependent upon the demand for, and supply of, peasant labour. Secondly, the demographic cycle is not in fact an independent variable, because the balance of class power within feudal societies – in particular, the levels of taxation that the lords are able to extract from their peasants – will impact upon the trajectory of the demographic cycle itself. High taxation during an upswing would tend to act as a restraint upon population increases; it would also worsen the conditions of the peasantry during a downswing. It would appear to follow from this that if the lords had been sufficiently powerful to exact high enough taxation, they might have prevented the demographic cycle from occurring at all. Finally, Brenner argues that the outcome of class struggles following demographic collapse will depend upon which class is successful in gaining control of the vacant land and of the labour-power of the remaining peasants; and this will in turn depend upon the capacity of rival classes to achieve their preferred outcomes.

Brenner supports his analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism by appealing to the 'striking historical datum' that the same pan-continental economic and demographic trends led to quite different societal outcomes in different regions of Europe.[44] In Eastern Europe the demographic downturn of the fourteenth century did not lead to the emancipation of the peasantry, but to the imposition of the second serfdom. The lords responded to the fall in peasant numbers by increasing exactions upon their remaining peasants. The Eastern lords were able successfully to pursue this strategy because of the high degree of intra-lordly cohesion and the disorganisation of the peasant class. In the West the peasants fared rather better. They proved to be particularly strong

in France, securing proprietorship of both land and labour-power and, thereby, a pattern of small-scale independent peasant proprietorship which severely inhibited the development of modern agricultural methods. It was in England that the property relations required for the rise of capitalism emerged out of this process of class struggle and class formation. The English peasants proved too strong for the imposition of a new serfdom – the 'Eastern' solution – but also too weak to resist the lords and to achieve peasant proprietorship of the land – the French solution. The emergence of capitalism required just this intermediate solution to the class struggle; a solution in which 'each side gets some but not all of what it wants'.[45] Brenner concludes that 'the question of serfdom in Europe cannot be reduced to a question of economics . . . [t]his is not to say that such outcomes were somehow arbitrary, but rather that they tend to be bound up with certain *historically specific* patterns of the development of the contending agrarian classes, and their relative strength in the different European societies'.[46]

In 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', Brenner directly addresses himself to Cohen's defence of the Primacy Thesis.[47] He argues that the development of those new productive forces 'fettered' by the existing relations of production cannot, of itself, bring into being those economic and social relations required for their efficient employment. Cohen had argued that the productive relations would eventually be transformed in order to facilitate the development of the productive forces, because it was in the interests of rational individuals to seize and employ the most efficient productive forces in view of their historically determined wants and needs, and therefore to overthrow economic and social relations impeding this development. Brenner responds that this account of the transition to capitalism presupposes the truth of all three of the following propositions: (i) the relationship between capitalist relations of production and the levels of productivity achievable through those relations is understood by the relevant historical agents; (ii) these agents believe that it is in their rational self-interest to struggle to overthrow the existing class relations in favour of capitalism; and (iii) these agents have the capacity to effect the required transformation. Brenner concludes that none of these conditions applies: '[m]erely to specify these conditions is . . . to rule out the possibility of such a process – at least until ongoing capitalist relations already existed somewhere else'.[48]

Consider (i): historical agents bring capitalist relations into being *because* they recognise that capitalism will facilitate an unprecedented development in human productivity. It is difficult to imagine that this sort of sophisticated theoretical appreciation of the logic of capitalism

would arise prior to the establishment of capitalist relations somewhere in the world. More importantly, there is no reason whatsoever to presume that the unlikely dawning of this apprehension would be coincident with any particular level of the development of the productive forces. This goes to the heart of Cohen's defence of the Primacy Thesis: the proposition that the introduction of capitalist relations would lead to a phenomenal increase in productivity would be true given only that level of development of the productive forces which was encouraged and sustained by the feudal relations of production. Brenner argues that this is the case for two reasons: (a) because the logic of market competition would compel all economic agents to adopt those more advanced techniques which were only partially employed within the feudal economy; and (b) because capitalist economic relations would compel economic agents to accumulate, specialise and innovate and, therefore, would stimulate rapid technological progress, regardless of the existing level of development of the productive forces. The proposition that capitalism is advantageous in this sense would be true regardless of the level of development of the productive forces attained at a particular stage in the development of the feudal economy.[49]

The difficulties with the other two assumptions required for Cohen's defence of technological determinism are fairly self-evident in view of Brenner's analysis of both the dynamics of feudal society and the emergence of capitalism in England. The transition from feudalism to capitalism did not occur because any group of agents within feudal societies discovered that it was in their rational self-interest to establish capitalist economic relations and had sufficient power to realise these interests. On the contrary, this transition occurred in England *despite* the fact that the self-interest of members of both the contending classes motivated them to seek the *preservation* of aspects of the feudal social structure; and it occurred precisely because both classes were to prove unable to secure the solution that was optimal from the perspective of their rational self-interest. The best outcome for the feudal lords was the Eastern solution; the best outcome for the peasants was the French solution. The English solution required that both classes got some of what they wanted, but not all of what they wanted. The peasants obviously had no rational self-interest in being deprived of their means of reproduction, but were deprived of them; the lords had no rational self-interest in losing control over the labour-power of their peasants, but did lose control over it. This frustration of the interests of both lords and peasants was a consequence of a balance of class power, which left each class with the strength to prevent the other class from achieving its optimal solution.

This critique of Cohen's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism develops a more fundamental critique of technological determinism. In 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', Brenner argues that technological determinism is a form of 'Marxist Smithianism'. In common with Adam Smith's theory of economic development, it equates motivational structures distinctive of capitalism with the rational interests of the 'individual' as such. It is capitalists who are compelled to seize and employ ever more efficient means of production, and they are compelled to do so not *qua* (rational) individuals, but *qua* (rational) capitalists. Where there is competition between many capitals those capitalists who fail to adopt new technologies will be driven out of business. To misrepresent the historically determined motivations of the capitalist class as universal human ones not only risks collaboration with the ideological core of capitalist apologetics, but – in common with methodological individualism – sweeps the logic inscribed within a definite social structure into the 'transhistorical' individual.

Notice also that, while Brenner explains the emergence of capitalism as the unintended consequence of a 'game' played by peasants and lords struggling to secure their class interests within feudal societies, he is hostile to those forms of rational choice theory premissed in methodological individualism. Explanatory primacy is accorded to the determinations of the structures within which agents – understood as the bearers of structurally-determined roles – act. What is important about the Brenner Thesis is that it seeks to demonstrate that individuals acting out the logics inscribed within one social structure (feudalism) may, under certain conditions, unintentionally – and in spite of their class interests – transform it into another (capitalism).

Cohen Plus Brenner? An Unlikely Reconciliation

It would appear that Brenner's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is fundamentally antithetical to Cohen's version of technological determinism. However, Alan Carling has recently argued that these two apparently contradictory positions are in fact mutually supportive, Brenner's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. Carling offers a synthesis of the two positions which, if successful, would appear finally to resolve the disjuncture between Marx's claims for the primacy of technological development – most notably, in the 1859 Preface – and his equally famous assertion, in the *Communist Manifesto*, that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle'.[50]

Carling provides an argument in favour of a synthesis of the 'narrative of the development of the productive forces' and the 'narrative of class struggle',[51] which is intended to 'add . . . to the plausibility of both, and suggests that Marx and Engels might be able to have their historical cake and eat it too'.[52] This synthesis depends upon the assertion that Brenner indulges a 'rather facile view' of Cohen's position.[53] This 'facile view' is precisely the one that has been endorsed in this chapter. If Carling is correct, then virtually the entire critique of Cohen pursued here is fundamentally misguided. It will be argued that Carling's argument is not finally convincing, and that Carling's own reading of Cohen reduces the latter's arguments to 'facile' ones.

Carling thinks that Brenner's interpretation of Cohen's position is 'facile' because it presumes that Cohen is committed to a 'conspiracy theory' of the emergence of capitalism: that is, to the claim that capitalism emerged as an intended consequence of the actions of rational individuals. Carling has little difficulty in exposing the absurdity of this claim, and appears more or less to conclude – precisely because it is absurd – that nothing Cohen had said could possibly have committed him to it. The only real argument Carling offers here is developed through an analogy with the culinary innovation which occurred as a consequence of accidental roastings and lickings of pork:

> When the boy licked the pig that had been burned and liked the taste, it was an accident that the pig had been roasted, but the roasting led to culinary innovation. What a functional explanation needs are claims of the kind: there will be pig roastings and pig lickings and, when there are, then there will be roughly predictable social consequences of the inevitable roasting and licking. Functional explanation does not depend on claims of the kind: the boy burned the hut, to trap the pig, to taste the flesh, to be able to institute capitalist social relations, to make a fortune running the first take-away outlet for bacon burgers, to encourage the development of fast food technology for the ultimate good of human kind.[54]

Presumably, the implication of this analogy is that Cohen should not be understood to be claiming either (i) that new relations of production appear *because* they are functional for the development of the productive forces, or (ii) that they appear *because* this is in the self-interest of rational individuals concerned with the removal of impediments to the seizure and employment of more efficient technologies. There is nothing wrong with Cohen's explanation of the *emergence* of economic and social structures, for the simple reason that Cohen offers no such explanation. Capitalist relations of production – like roasted pigs – come into being 'accidentally'. This opens the way for an appeal

to Brenner's analysis in order to fill in the pieces that are missing from Cohen's theory.

Carling offers an account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism which, while drawing upon the work of Brenner, suggests that although the emergence of capitalism was not quite inevitable, it was at least highly probable. To begin with, Carling considers what he calls Cohen's 'hand-waving argument', concluding that it is neither obviously false nor particularly plausible. This argument relies upon the Development Thesis, not to explain the selection of capitalist relations of production directly, but rather to explain how capitalism might be expected to emerge as a consequence of the general tendency to devise and deploy more efficient productive forces. For the sake of the argument, it is conceded to Brenner that there is in fact 'no tendency to cumulative technological development' within feudal relations of production.[55] However, it will not follow from this that there will be no 'cumulative technological development' within societies that can be legitimately designated as feudal societies. The feudal ruling class will not be sufficiently organised or centralised to supervise or control a large and dispersed population. There will therefore be sufficient space to allow for the emergence of 'interstitial zones of social action' within feudal societies, that is, zones which escape those restraints upon technological development that are imposed by the feudal relations of production.[56] If we allow that people are 'rational across history' – in the sense predicated by the Development Thesis – it will follow that 'there is some good reason to think that some people, somewhere within the general run of feudal society, will take advantage of the looseness of the society to innovate against the usual grain of the same society'.[57]

Carling appears to recognise that this 'hand-waving argument' rather begs the question; it would be better simply to admit that it is a complete red herring. It has some initial plausibility only because the 'interstitial zones of social action' are defined in purely negative terms, that is, by the fact that they escape those restraints upon technological development which are imposed by feudal relations of production. But some kind of economic and social structure must be presumed to be operating within these interstitial zones; and the content of these structures will decide whether they are zones of development or stagnation. There could be no space within feudal societies within which self-interested individuals were free to indulge their *transhistorical* interest in developing, seizing and employing new productive forces outside of *any* kind of socio-economic structure. Indeed, Brenner would argue that these zones would only facilitate cumulative technological development if they were

capitalist zones; and even then would not do so as a result of any trans-historical interest in the development of the productive force, but because of the imperatives to technological development inscribed within the capitalist system itself. Now, it might be responded that these rational individuals will have an incentive to ensure that whatever relations of production are operative within the interstitial zones do in fact facilitate the development of the productive forces. But then we would be back where we started: that is, with the self-conscious introduction of capitalist relations because of the stimulus they provide for technological development.

Carling argues that once we allow for the operation of a world market, it is possible to avoid a conspiracy theory of the triumph of capitalism within feudal societies. The world market will act as a selection mechanism, favouring those productive units which employ efficient technology, and driving backward producers to the wall. If we add that the most efficient productive units will be deployed within capitalist relations of production, then the world market will select in favour of these relations. Carling recognises that, in assuming dependence on the world market, he is failing to address Brenner's central point: 'that such dependence is what distinguishes the result (i.e. capitalism) from the starting point (i.e. feudalism)'.[58] One response to this would be to argue that the market selection mechanism will be supported by a political/military mechanism. If feudal societies resist the allurements of the world market, then they will be vulnerable to extra-economic pressures applied by more efficient, and therefore mightier, capitalist states. However, as Carling himself acknowledges, this whole argument rests upon the assumption that capitalism has appeared somewhere in the system. He responds that it is at least highly probable that 'there'll always be an England'. Given the recurrence of demographic collapse – and therefore of the struggle between feudal classes to gain control over vacant land and vacant peasants across a number of feudal societies – there will be a high probability that somewhere class capacities will eventually fall within a range required for the 'English' solution, and therefore for the emergence of capitalism.[59] We are bought to 'the brink of [an] agreement' between Brenner's analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and Cohen's statement of the general theory of history, that is, to the brink of the long-awaited synthesis between the Marxist narratives of class struggle and of technological development.[60]

Let us begin our examination of Carling's argument by considering the reasons he offers for expecting capitalism finally to triumph over feudalism, once it is allowed that capitalist relations of production are

virtually bound to emerge somewhere in the system. The emergence of this capitalist zone is a necessary precondition for the emergence of a capitalist world market. The world market will stimulate the triumph of capitalism by selecting in favour of the most efficient productive units – and, therefore, in favour of capitalist productive relations – throughout the system. If these other countries resist the allurements of the world market, then the more productive capitalist zone will be strong enough to coerce them into market transactions, or directly to impose capitalist relations of production upon them. There are two obvious problems with this. Firstly, let us allow that the world market is in operation, and that this market will select in favour of the more efficient productive units that can be expected to develop within capitalist relations of production. On one reading, this is to assume that the 'interstitial zones' that will arise within feudal societies will – at least sometimes – be capitalist zones. Alternatively, Carling might be read as arguing only that, once feudal societies have entered into the world market, some individuals within them will realise that they must adopt capitalist relations of production in order to compete, and therefore capitalist 'interstitial zones' will emerge in predominantly feudal zones. But both these explanations presume precisely the kind of 'conspiracy theory' which, so Carling argued, was inimical to a proper reading of Cohen's argument: capitalist relations of production are intentionally introduced because they are understood to facilitate the development and efficient employment of productive forces. Secondly, Carling concedes that there is no reason why feudal classes in other parts of the system should not insulate themselves from the operation of this market – the emergence of capitalism in one area is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of the world market. The spread of capitalism may therefore be a result of 'an auxiliary mechanism of a political/military kind'.[61] The triumph of capitalism would then be related to its tendency to promote the development of the productive forces only in an indirect way: it would explain the superior military and political power of the capitalist state. But, if this is true, then the Primacy Thesis – as supported by the Development Thesis – ends up explaining neither the emergence of capitalism nor the eventual triumph of capitalism throughout the system. Moreover, the political and military power of the capitalist zone is only accidentally related to the development of its productive forces. It might be that it possesses this power for quite different reasons. For example, in an early stage in its development, it might be that the capitalist zone does have superior military and political leverage, not because its productive forces are more efficiently deployed but because the other areas in the system

have been hit by some natural disaster, for example, a European plague which is avoided by the 'English' zone not because it is capitalist but because it is an island.

Let us now turn to Carling's discussion of the requirements for a valid functional explanation. According to him, all that is required for functional explanation is claims of the kind 'there will be pig roastings and pig lickings and, when there are, then there will be roughly predictable social consequences of the inevitable roastings and lickings'. But surely more is required than this: according to Cohen, a functional account of this process would require that the beneficial effects of pig roastings figured in the explanation of their occurrence, through the operation of a consequence law. A valid functional explanation in this case would take the form, 'If it is the case that if pig roastings were to occur at *t1*, then they would have beneficial consequences for culinary innovation at *t2*, then pig roastings do occur at *t3*". There are two obvious ways in which the consequence law might be explanatory in such a case: (i) because of the operation of some natural selection mechanism; or (ii) because the relationship between pig roastings and culinary innovation is understood by the relevant agents – or, to make this more plausible, that the relationship between roasting animals and culinary innovation is understood by the relevant actors, but nobody has ever tried it with pigs. In spite of his belief that the identification of a natural selection mechanism could serve his explanatory purposes, Cohen's functional explanation of historical development appears to require a claim of type (ii).

Cohen's argument would seem to require some sort of 'conspiracy theory' simply because his defence of technological determinism is premissed upon those claims about human nature that underwrite the Development Thesis. Rational individuals confronted by a 'historical situation' of 'scarcity' will tend to innovate and to 'seize and employ' the more efficient productive forces that consequently become available. Where this tendency is frustrated by the existing relations of production, they will be overthrown in favour of new relations. But Carling denies that the rational interests of these transhistorical individuals explain anything at all: they explain neither the actions of rational agents within feudal or capitalist economies, nor the emergence and triumph of capitalism over feudalism. Carling affects a synthesis between Cohen and Brenner by effectively abandoning the only real argument that Cohen had offered in favour of the 'attractiveness' of technological determinism. If the Primacy Thesis is to have any explanatory purchase at all, then it must presuppose something akin to what Carling describes as a 'conspiracy theory'. How else

could the interest of rational individuals in developing and employing more efficient productive forces enter into explanations of epochal social transformations?[62]

Cohen's defence of technological determinism requires either (i) that the development of the productive forces is the intentional object of the actions of rational individuals; or (ii) that there is an historically significant coincidence between the self-interest of rational individuals and the development of the forces. This points towards some kind of contractarianism, rather than towards a conspiracy theory. It might be thought that an argument of the requisite kind is provided by Hobbes. In the Hobbesian 'state of nature' it is irrational for individuals to develop the productive forces, because any new technology is – under conditions of lawlessness – liable to be destroyed. In other words, the prevalent economic and social structure – or, in this case, the absence of any structure – makes it irrational for socially situated individuals to develop and employ more efficient technologies.[63] However, assuming that rational individuals have a transhistorical interest in the development of the productive forces, it is rational for them to contract out of that society, and to institute an economic and social structure which will facilitate this development. The emergence of a new economic and social structure would then be explained, in part, by the transhistorical interest of rational individuals in the conquest of scarcity. But, of course, Hobbes is attempting not to explain the emergence of the Leviathan state but to justify such a state; and to do so relative to some general claims about what is required to improve the human condition, which might be expected, within a (hypothetical) 'state of nature', to coincide with the rational self-interest of all the relevant agents. Applied to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, this kind of contract would clearly prejudice the self-interest of most individuals: rational serfs and lords would be required to opt for capitalism not out of self-interest but for the long-term good of mankind.

There is, perhaps, an interpretation of Carling's reconstruction of Cohen's position which might permit a reconciliation between Cohen's arguments in favour of technological determinism and Carling's appeal to the operation of some kind of natural selection mechanism. We might allow that the initial appearance of capitalism occurs accidentally, but that it eventually triumphs over feudalism for the sorts of reasons suggested by Cohen. Consider Carling's pig lickings and pig roastings. The first pig is accidentally roasted, but given that this occurs within an environment in which people can be expected to enjoy eating roasted pigs, the culinary benefits of the pig roasting will figure in explanations of the development of pig roasting. Analogously, it might

be argued that capitalism will initially emerge accidentally, but given that this occurs within an environment in which people have a rational interest in developing the productive forces, the benefits of capitalism for the development of the productive forces will figure in explanations of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The problems with this are fairly transparent. Carling acknowledges that once capitalism has emerged, its triumph is not guaranteed relative to an environment that is characterised by the presence of individuals with a rational interest in the conquest of scarcity, but relative to one that is characterised by the operation of the world market. However, the world market is not a permissible natural selection mechanism for the sort of explanation that Carling is seeking to provide: capitalism itself *creates* (or fails to create) the very environment that selects in favour of capitalism.

The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism

Many of the criticisms of Cohen's account of the emergence of capitalism will also apply to the transition from capitalism to socialism. However, there is a further problem in this case. It has been argued that it is reasonable to suppose that there will be a tendency for new productive forces to become available for use within pre-capitalist class societies which will not be 'seiz[ed] and employ[ed]' within the existing relations of production. It is less clear that this incompatibility is going to arise within an economic structure in which there is a systemic imperative to accumulate, specialise and innovate. The interests of capitalists might appear to be sufficiently coincident with the interests of technological innovators to rule out the possibility of a technological ceiling for capitalism. If so, the incompatibility thesis does not apply.

Marx's analysis of capitalism provided an account of how the required incompatibility between capitalist relations of production and the indefinite development and efficient employment of new productive forces arises. This argument appealed to a characteristic of capitalism which has been discussed above. Capitalists are compelled to 'seize and employ' the most efficient available means of production in order to reproduce themselves as capitalists, that is, in order to survive market competition. They do not do so because they have an interest in the development of the forces as such; and certainly not because they have a direct interest in providing for the satisfaction of human needs under conditions of scarcity. Once this is granted, all that is then required to generate the required incompatibility is to identify some mechanism

inscribed within capitalist relations of production, which undermines this happy coincidence between the pursuit of profit and the efficient deployment of the available productive forces. Marx identified just such a mechanism in his analysis of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production: the imperative to make profits condemned capitalism to endure recurrent and intensifying economic crises.

In *KMTH*, Cohen does argue that contradictions will arise within capitalism in the form of recurrent and deepening economic crises: while there is 'no economically legislated final breakdown, but what is *de facto* the last depression occurs when there is a downturn in the cycle *and* the forces are ready to accept a socialist structure *and* the proletariat is sufficiently class conscious and organised'.[64] He adds that, as these economic crises intensify, the transition from capitalism to socialism becomes increasingly feasible. There are three principal problems with this response. (1) Cohen ends up simply asserting that there is some systemic tendency to economic crisis. He abandons Marx's analysis of capitalism – including both the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the labour theory of value – but he offers no alternative analysis in support of the claim that capitalism is *systematically* prone to recurrent economic crises. (2) Even if it is conceded that the required incompatibility will arise, there is no reason whatsoever to conclude that capitalism will be overthrown in favour of socialism. The above quotation is perfectly consistent with the assertion that the required coincidence between economic depression and a class-conscious and organised proletariat will *never* arise. Nor are there any obvious reasons for believing that, as economic crises deepen, it becomes increasingly probable that the proletariat will be *able* to affect this transition. (3) Cohen's detailed discussion of the contradictions allegedly inscribed in advanced capitalism makes no appeal whatsoever to this kind of argument. It depends instead upon the observation that capitalism systematically promotes increased productivity – and therefore consumerism – at the expense of reductions in working hours.

Points (2) and (3) require some elaboration. Is there any reason to believe that the proletariat will become progressively more class-conscious and better-organised as the economic crises which ravage the capitalist economy become increasingly intense, until the necessary coincidence between revolutionary agency and structural contradiction occurs? First, consider the question of class-consciousness. The working class must be conscious both of the systematic failings of capitalism, and of the fact that these contradictions can only be finally resolved if capitalism is overthrown in favour of socialism. But to imagine that the economic contradictions of capitalism might

somehow deliver a class-conscious proletariat would mark a return to the sort of naive evolutionism that dominated the Second International. Socialist leaders would need only to sit back and patiently wait for the phoenix of a class-conscious proletariat to arise from the ashes of capitalism. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the central question for Marxists, from Gramsci onwards, has been how it is that capitalism has managed to survive *despite* being plunged into recurrent crises: '[i]n advanced capitalism, even with fettered productive forces, it is not clear why the repressive capacity of the state should decline, why it should lose the loyalty of the police and military in the face of social conflict'.[65] Moreover, as Wright, Levine and Sober go on to point out, even if the workers are convinced that the existence of socialism would be in their interests, 'this does not imply that they will also believe that it is in their interests to suffer the costs of destroying capitalism even when they have the organisational capacity to succeed in this endeavour'.[66] Nor, of course, is there any reason for assuming that they will possess this organisational capacity, or that they are more likely to acquire it as capitalism's progress is disrupted by deepening economic crises. The very 'technological' developments which are characteristic of advanced capitalism – in particular, increasing labour market segmentation and the organisation of production on a global scale – would appear more likely to undermine, than to reinforce, the class capacities of the proletariat.

Cohen's most extensive and careful discussion of the contradictions of advanced capitalism appeals to an incompatibility between forces and relations of a quite different sort. He argues that capitalism tends to *misuse* the available productive forces because it systemically promotes increased productivity at the expense of the alleviation of toil. Confronted with conditions of scarcity, this output-expanding bias served a progressive function; but under conditions of 'abundance', it becomes a fetter upon the optimal deployment of the productive forces. Cohen argues that, once it is granted that at some level of production the utility to be gained from increments of free time is greater than that to be had from further increments of consumption, it follows that capitalist economic relations must – in this particular sense – eventually come to 'fetter' the efficient deployment of the productive forces:

> It is undeniable that capitalist relations of production possess an output-expanding bias. So the only way of denying that they are potentially irrational in the stated respect is to assert that labour is so enjoyable (or not so unenjoyable) and resources are so plentiful, and the satisfaction to be had from goods and services is so limitless that no matter how much is being

consumed it remains desirable to consume more, instead of expanding freedom from labour: a rather large assertion.[67]

Cohen accepts that it would be extremely hazardous to attempt to specify some level of productivity at which capitalism becomes 'irrational' in this sense. He concludes that '[f]or some value of "very high" and some value of "substantial", capitalism is detrimental when consumption is very high and the working day is substantial'.[68]

Cohen needs to show that rational individuals will in fact come to prefer increments of free time to further increments of consumption, because this appeal to the utility of freedom from labour is intended to support the claim that advanced capitalism 'fetters' economic development relative to the self-interest of rational individuals. There is an obvious problem here. For example, if this is true, then why do many people welcome the opportunity to do overtime in order to purchase 'frivolous' consumer goods? Why have trade unions – despite their success in resisting the inherent tendency of capitalism to force down wage rates – proved generally unwilling to strike for more free time? It is in response to these kinds of problems that Cohen breaks his silence on the issue of ideology. The failure of workers to realise where their rational self-interest lies is to be explained by the systematic tendency of capitalism to promote consumption. Capitalist enterprises spend huge sums upon advertisements that extol the virtues of increasingly frivolous products, but there is a conspicuous absence of advertisements promoting the alleviation of toil: 'WHEN YOUR UNION NEGOTIATES, MAKE IT GO FOR SHORTER HOURS, NOT MORE PAY. ELECTRIC CARVING KNIVES ARE FINE BUT NOTHING BEATS FREEDOM.'[69]

It is difficult to see how this special theory of advanced capitalism can be accommodated within Cohen's general theory of history. The productive forces are not 'fettered' in any of the senses which Cohen identified when elaborating the general theory of history: they are not idling (indeed they are not idle enough), nor is their entry into the productive sphere being blocked by the relations of production. Moreover, the productive forces do not outgrow advanced capitalism relative to either of the measures of productivity appealed to by Cohen. There is no necessary reason to suppose that a 'very high' level of consumption will be coincident with a reduction in the labour-time required to reproduce the working class, nor are the productive relations dysfunctional relative to the actual needs and wants of those individuals situated within the advanced capitalist economies. The issue at stake here concerns what individuals *really* need and want.[70] It

is not that the development of the productive forces brings them into conflict with the prevailing relations of production, and that this contradiction is then fought out in 'ideological' terms. It is rather that the 'ideological' battle is fought in order to *produce* the required contradiction: it is the evils of capitalism that are at issue here, and not its inherent contradictions.

5

Reconsidering Marx's Theory of History: The Demise of Technological Determinism

Cohen's defence of technological determinism has been subjected to a devastating critical assault since *KMTH* was first published in 1978. The most serious difficulties have all arisen because of Cohen's appeal to (transhistorical) generic human interests and human capacities, and his corresponding neglect of (historical) class interests and class capacities. It is deeply implausible to appeal to the universal interests of humankind in order to explain technological development *within* any given mode of production. Capitalists are compelled to innovate and accumulate because of the implacable logic of their structural locations, and not because they are the conscious bearers of some universal human interest in the conquest of scarcity. This objection, however, need not prove fatal for the Primacy Thesis. Capitalist relations of production may arise and persist where they are optimal for the development of human industry, even though this eventuality is no part of the motivation of capitalists. But we have also identified serious problems with such an explanation of epochal social transformations. In particular, the transition from feudalism to capitalism had little to do with the realisation of the transhistorical interests of the rational individual. Cohen's historical materialism might appear to require either that rational individuals abstract themselves from history, in order to select optimal relations of production at the critical historical junctures – covert *contractarianism*; or the 'ruse of reason' operating behind the backs of historical agents – covert *Hegelianism*. Perhaps we should conclude that the Primacy Thesis, having been briefly resurrected in 1978, had been laid to rest by the early 1980s. However, since the publication of *KMTH*, Cohen

has returned to reconsider, revise, clarify and (wherever possible) defend his original position.

Transhistorical Interest and Class Interests

In the article 'Forces and Relations of Production'[1], Cohen distances himself from an 'absurd' proposition which, he argues, was not advanced in *KMTH*, but which has been ascribed to him by many of his critics. It had not been his intention to argue that improvements in the productive forces could be explained through a direct appeal to the (allegedly) transhistorical interest in lightening the burden of human labour: 'capitalism prevails when it does because of the massive contribution it makes to the conquest of scarcity, however remote that end may be from the motivation of forces-improving capitalists'.[2] Orthodox historical materialism, then, appeals to transhistorical interests in order to explain epochal social transformations, but not in order to explain given technological developments within a particular mode of production.

This leaves most of the problems discussed in the previous chapter unresolved. As Cohen admits, an adequate defence of the Primacy Thesis, so interpreted, would require the identification of a 'search and selection mechanism'. But it is clearly not the case that 'rational individuals' – at the critical historical junctures and guided by 'their' transhistorical interests – (literally) *select* production relations after a search through the alternatives. It is therefore necessary to identify some form of natural selection mechanism. The problem here was addressed in the discussion of Carling's efforts to achieve an unlikely reconciliation between Cohen's technological determinism and Brenner's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. If the Primacy Thesis is to have explanatory purchase, then the relations of production must surely be selected *because* they advance the relevant transhistorical interests. Not just any natural selection mechanism will do: the mechanism must be driven by the transhistorical human interest in technological development. But these interests could animate history only if they were consciously pursued by historical agents, and this raises precisely those same problems attendant upon literal readings of the search and selection metaphor: it is clear that the allegedly transhistorical interest in the development of the forces seldom motivates real historical actors.

Perhaps the most promising line here would be to argue that there is in fact a fortuitous coincidence between the interests of historical

individuals and the transhistorical interests of humankind. The ruling class can count upon the support of subordinate classes so long as its class interests remain fortuitously convergent with the general interest. However, once its class interests are no longer conducive to the development of human industry, but have turned into its 'fetters', it will be abandoned for the embrace of that revolutionary class promising to deliver a better future. Now, presumably, during the period of its ascendancy, a ruling class does not secure the support of the exploited because it is temporarily best able to secure technological progress *per se*, or we would be back where we started, but rather because technological progress has tangible benefits for its subordinates – delivering, for example, a historically unprecedented 'standard of living'. No-one is directly motivated by the universal interest in the conquest of scarcity; everyone acts as if they were so motivated. A revolutionary working class struggling against an exhausted capitalism will be motivated by its patent inefficiencies – its failure fully to employ the available productive forces – but the overthrow of capitalism will in fact occur once it is no longer able to satisfy the universal human interest in the progressive conquest of scarcity. What is required here is a coincidence between capitalism's completion of its 'historical mission' and its descent into ever-deepening economic crises.[3] This explanation requires that a particular set of historical agents – motivated by their own interests, and pursuing those interests within a definite historical conjuncture – will fulfil their historical role once the moment of truth arrives: that they will embark upon their historical mission even though they are not conscious of having one.

There are two obvious problems with this. In the first place, such an explanation presupposes that the transparency of capitalism's terminus will produce the requisite coincidence between the interests of class agents and the interests of humankind. Yet whilst Cohen asserts that capitalism's demise will be signalled by ever-deepening economic crises, it is far from clear how he might justify this assertion given his wholesale abandonment of Marx's special theory of capitalism.[4] In the second place, even if Cohen is granted this assumption, it provides no guarantee that the working class will assume – let alone successfully complete – its historical mission. This will all depend upon whether or not individual workers understand that the recurrence of crises is inscribed in the immanent logic of capitalism as such, and is not simply attributable to the inadequacies of a particular government or the failures of a particular species of capitalism. Even were they to be convinced that capitalism was inefficient, they would also need to be convinced that socialism would be more efficient. Moreover, if they are

to succeed in their historical mission – as the Primacy Thesis requires – wanting to overthrow capitalism is not enough; they must also have the capacity to overthrow it.[5]

Fettering

Fidelity to the version of orthodox historical materialism sketched out in the 1859 Preface requires that there will in fact be 'an epoch of social revolution' once the existing relations of production have ceased to be 'forms of development' of the productive forces and have become their 'fetters'. But in what precise sense is it anticipated that the relations of production in all class societies eventually become 'fetters' upon technological development? This is evidently a crucial problem for Cohen and it is one to which he has returned to since the publication of *KMTH*.[6] He recognises that if the concept of fettering is to do the explanatory work required of it, then it must meet two constraints: (i) the *predictability* constraint – it must be reasonable to suppose that the relations of production will become fetters upon the productive forces; and (ii) the *revolution* constraint – it must also be reasonable to assume that if such fettering occurs, then it will precipitate an 'epoch of social revolution'. Fettering must happen and, when it happens, social revolution must happen.

What, then, is the appropriate definition of fettering? Cohen considers and rejects the most common interpretation: that 'fettering' occurs where the existing relations of production block the *development* of new technologies. A strong reading of this claim would require technological development to grind to an abrupt halt. While such a dramatic terminus might provoke a social revolution, it is never going to be reached: 'absolute development fettering' fails the predictability constraint. A weaker reading requires only the 'relative inferiority' of existing relations of production. Technological development occurs, but some alternative set of relations would develop the productive forces more efficiently. The problem here is that, whilst this meets the predictability constraint, it fails the revolution constraint – 'relative inferiority' is unlikely to precipitate social revolution. On neither interpretation, then, is it likely that the epoch of social revolution will ever dawn. But the problem is even more serious than this. Cohen finally concedes that many socialists have become convinced that capitalism's failure is a 'dubious' one: it may be that nothing beats capitalism when it comes to stimulating technological development. If so, then 'relative inferiority' fails to measure up even to the predictability constraint.

Cohen therefore considers abandoning this conception in favour of a different one: 'use fettering'. Relations of production which continue to develop the forces might nonetheless fail to *employ* them efficiently. Clearly, absolute use fettering – the complete unemployment of all the available productive forces – would spectacularly fail the predictability constraint. If the shift to use fettering is to solve any of our problems, then it will be to 'relative' use fettering. Cohen argues that relative use fettering meets the predictability constraint and that it is reasonable to expect that, when it occurs, it will precipitate social revolution. Failure to use the productive forces is more likely to precipitate revolution than failure to develop them, because this failure is evident: idle machinery is visible; the machines that would have developed under alternative relations of production are not.

However, while it may be reasonable to anticipate that any class-divided system will eventually fail optimally to employ the available productive forces *relative to the standard of full employment*, this is not the appropriate standard: relative use fettering – if it is to meet the revolution constraint – requires not only that the forces are currently underemployed, but also that they would be more efficiently employed after the transition to a 'higher' mode of production. Capitalism's failure to deploy the productive forces efficiently must be understood to be the consequence of the inherent failures of capitalism and the working class must be convinced that socialism will be more 'efficient'.

Another obvious difficulty with the use fettering proposal is discussed by Cohen.[7] Consider an economy which has taken centuries to develop even the most rudimentary agricultural tools, and which will take a few more centuries to progress so far as the horse-drawn plough. Painfully slow as this development is, this system might be very efficient when it comes to deploying the available forces: no spade ever stands idle. Conversely, we can imagine an extraordinarily dynamic economy in which whole generations of computer languages are rapidly outgrown, but in which hundreds of computer terminals are not used. Even if only the tiniest fraction of available computing facilities is used in a technologically dynamic society, this is evidently preferable to the fullest possible deployment of every available abacus in a technologically stagnant one. It matters, then, both that technological potential should be developed and that the available productive forces should be efficiently employed. Cohen therefore rejects both development fettering and use fettering in favour of 'net fettering': 'look neither merely at how fast they [i.e. the relations of production] develop the forces nor merely at how well they use them but at the trajectories they promise of *used productive power*, which is a multiple of level of development

and degree of use'.[8] Where the existing relations of production are very good at developing the productive forces, we may be willing to tolerate sub-optimal deployment of the available technology – fast development compensating for inefficient use.

Having introduced the net fettering proposal, Cohen does not return to consider whether it measures up to his two constraints: the predictability and revolution constraints. This is a strange omission. The reason, perhaps, is that, having demonstrated that use fettering does meet these constraints, he considers the shift to net fettering to be a mere modification of this use fettering proposal, securing it against some fairly obvious objections. But it is in fact far from clear that this new proposal meets either of the constraints. Consider the predictability constraint: it must be reasonable to assume that net fettering will eventually occur in any class-bound system. Perhaps this is plausible when applied to the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. But what about any prospective transition from capitalism to socialism? Cohen admits that socialism may be a slower developer of the productive forces than capitalism has been, but argues that slower development might prove to be 'a reasonable price to pay for better use of productive power'.[9] Yet even if the premiss that socialism will deploy the available forces more efficiently is conceded, this still leaves us a long way short of the conclusion that capitalism is 'net fettering' relative to socialism. This conclusion is not so much wrong as imponderable. We would need, for example, to be able to estimate both the speed of technological development and also the degree to which available technologies will be employed within each system, over an extended period. As for the revolution constraint, the point that such desperate counter-factuals as these are radically imponderable is an obvious enough one.[10] Net fettering would appear to fail both the constraints Cohen himself stipulates for any definition adequate to salvage his version of orthodox historical materialism.

There is a further difficulty. Cohen argued in *KMTH* that capitalism fails to deploy the productive powers 'efficiently': it develops and uses them in order to produce the wrong things. An economy that consistently developed and fully employed its technology in order to manufacture nothing but weapons and Christmas crackers would be 'inefficient' relative to some (in this case, uncontroversial) assumptions within philosophical anthropology. Socialism is, then, superior to a moribund capitalism not because it promises to increase the gross national product – if such calculations could even be made – but because it will secure a 'benign realignment of labour, leisure and education':[11]

> Socialists who accept the superiority of capitalism as a developer of productive power can defend their preference for socialism on the ground of how it uses productive power only by affirming that socialism offers a better way of life. (That is not, of course, a paltry reason for preferring socialism.)[12]

Perhaps not: but it is a very 'paltry reason' for accepting technological determinism. The working class overthrows capitalism when the good of humanity requires the redeployment of the productive forces.

Philosophical Anthropology

This brings us to Cohen's recent critique of Marx's philosophical anthropology.[13] Particularly in his early writings, Marx tended to view 'man' as an essentially productive being. In pre-history, men and women were condemned to suffer their work-activity as a mere means to secure consumption needs; with the dawning of 'truly human history', however, their activity at last becomes an end in itself. Communist men and women are finally liberated from those constraining predications inscribed within the (pre-historical) division of labour. In a famous passage, Marx wrote that

> in communist society . . . nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.[14]

Cohen has recently argued that radical liberation from socially constructed and stable predications would deprive us of the means of fulfilment of another, equally vital, human need: 'the subject's relation to itself, and that aspect of the subject's relationship to others which is a mediated (that is, indirect) form of relationship to itself'.[15] It is not enough to be able freely to create our world and ourselves, we also need to 'know' who we are (the verb itself suggesting a process of discovery and not of invention). Our sense of identity depends upon our embrace of those relatively stable predications (Québecois, Welsh, Catholic, Buddhist, painter, farmer, etc.) which situate us within the world by identifying us with particular aspects of the 'objective social reality'.[16] Determinate and stable identities of this kind are essential to

a fully satisfactory human existence: we want to be free, but not as free as Marx had supposed – not liberated from such existentially resonant predications. But if Marx's 'conception of man' is fatally 'one-sided', then does it follow from this that orthodox historical materialism is unsustainable?

Cohen argues that Marx's philosophical anthropology was not intended to explain production within (pre-historical) class societies. Human beings may or may not be essentially creative, but their existence is anyway finally consonant with their essence only after humanity has awoken from the long night of self-estrangement to the dawn of 'truly human history'. Technological determinism is concerned with the dark satanic mills and strip-lit infernal offices – with production in (pre-)history, not with the (free) production of history. Cohen's reconstruction of technological determinism explains productive development as the predictable outcome of the confrontation between rational human beings and material scarcity. We labour in order to eat – and to provide our children with Streetfighter I, and then with Streetfighter II – not because the monotony of production lines and office routines is a means of creative self-expression. Marx's philosophical anthropology therefore has no direct bearing upon his general theory of history: '[t]he argument would not benefit from a premise which says that humanity is by nature productive in the sense that human fulfilment lies in some kind of productive activity, for such a premise is irrelevant to the question of how and why humanity is productive in history'.[17] Yet if Marx underestimated the historical importance of religious, ethnic and national identities, then will this not have consequences for *both* his philosophical anthropology *and* his theory of history? For example, potential class agents ('classes-in-themselves'), whose subjectivity is partially defined by institutions and ideologies that have become 'fetters' upon technological development, will be less likely to become active class agents ('classes-for-themselves') willing and able to kick away the superstructural supports stabilising exhausted relations of production.

Cohen concedes that there may be 'parallel errors' here, but he does not consider in any real detail what these might be. As a matter of Marx's intellectual biography, there is in fact some connection between this conception of humanity and the development of the theory of historical materialism. (Marx's best-known statement of the rejected philosophical anthropology is to be found in *The German Ideology*, the same work in which he first sketched out the lineaments of orthodox historical materialism.) These two strands in Marx's thought are also intimately connected on a crude Hegelian reading of historical

materialism. Humanity precipitates the descent into pre-history – the alienation of essence from existence – in order to secure the material preconditions for the final negation of this negation – the reconciliation of existence and essence. The Owl of Minerva's flight finally exposes religious, ethnic and national identities as necessary delusions consoling and constraining those condemned to toil to produce the material preconditions for the ultimate commencement of truly human history. But all this is utterly incredible, for precisely the reasons identified by Elster. Having exorcised *Geist*, the historical *materialist* can identify no purposeful agent willing and able to orchestrate such beautiful history. Historical agents do not labour in mindless or dangerous occupations, or work their way from the dirty slum to the dismal suburb, or risk their lives upon the barricades, to secure the final redemption of humanity. The human essence – whatsoever it may or may not be – is neither a historical agent nor (typically) the animator of historical agents. The connections between Marx's philosophical anthropology and his theory of history are, then, irrevocably severed once this metaphysic has been abandoned to the Humean flames.

Cohen recognises the importance of Hegel's 'image of history' for the development of Marx's 'theory of history'. But he does not argue that the development of human industry occurs in order to produce the material preconditions for the final transition to a classless society. The motor of (pre-)history, then, is not the essence of Man, but the (alleged) interests of men: historical agents confront scarcity and seek to satisfy their needs; they have an interest in technological development. They also have the intelligence and rationality to develop and deploy ever more efficient technologies – the capacity for technological development. As noted above, Cohen adamantly denies that technological development within a particular mode of production – for example, capitalism – is driven by any universal interest in the conquest of scarcity: capitalists innovate because they must make profits. What, then, happens at the critical historical junctures? Presumably, the revolutionary class is driven into open revolt because the needs of members of that class – which are harnessed to the overall level of technological development – cannot be met within the existing relations of production. Whether or not Man is essentially active and creative is beside the point. Revolutions occur because people need things and because class agents pursue class interests – not because anyone is actively seeking to secure the material preconditions for the final transition from the kingdom of necessity to that of freedom.

What, then, explains the transition from pre-capitalism to capitalism? It is in the class interests of the bourgeoisie to wrest the means of

production (and hence exploitation) from the hands of an exhausted feudal ruling class; and it is in the class interests of feudalism's exploited to become capitalism's exploited: capitalism will liberate the productive forces, increase productivity, and improve the material conditions of even those condemned to belong to its worst-off group. But there is, here, a radical disjuncture between the narrative of technological development and the narrative of class struggle. The conquest of scarcity does not motivate historical class agents. Clearly, the bourgeoisie acts in pursuit of its class interests. But is there a happy coincidence between these class interests and the 'universal interest'? Only if the universal interest is understood to be the interest of Man in the progressive conquest of scarcity. It is not in the universal interest, understood as the interest of all the classes acting within this historical conjuncture, for the simple reason that the cost of forces-improving capitalism for the exploited class may actually be a 'worsening' of their material condition and the intensification of the burden of their labour.

What about the prospective transition from capitalism to socialism? Well, it is not obviously in the conscious interests of the workers to overthrow capitalism given (i) that Cohen has failed to justify the assumption that capitalism is doomed to plunge into ever-deepening crises; (ii) that there are grounds to doubt the nature and degree of socialism's 'efficiency'; (iii) that capitalism produces 'false' needs; and (iv) that risks and uncertainties attend the struggle for socialism. Historical agents risk their lives – and their immediate material interests – in an effort to secure a 'benign realignment of labour, leisure and education'. But this suggests that the proletariat is destined to become a self-consciously universal class: it rediscovers its human needs and pursues the good of Mankind. Disputes within philosophical anthropology are, then, relevant to the only question it makes sense to ask on these assumptions: not the empirical one – 'What will the proletariat do?' – but the normative one – 'What ought the proletariat to do?'

Having argued that Marx's philosophical anthropology is of no direct relevance to historical materialism, Cohen sometimes implies that he regards the empirical historical evidence to be relevant to the reassessment of the philosophical anthropology. People are attached to religious, ethnic and national identities; and such attachments therefore constitute a 'vital area of human need'. If this is the argument, then it involves precisely that confusion between normative discourse and explanatory theory which Cohen is at pains to dispel. Appeals to Hegel suggest that Cohen's point is not simply that people do have such attachments, but that they need such attachments. Being simply human

is not a way of being *truly* human: the ('abstract') universal is necessarily embodied in the ('concrete') particular.[18] But even if we do need to embrace and celebrate predications relating us to the 'objective social reality', it does not follow – as Cohen acknowledges[19] – that we need to cling to religious, ethnic, and national self-identifications. Marxism's founders argued that such predications do not so much relate us to, as conceal from us, 'objective social reality'. Empirical evidence for the ubiquity of powerful identifications of this kind is primarily a problem for the explanatory theory: that is, for orthodox historical materialism. Does social revolution presuppose a prior revolution: agents revolting against themselves – against predications that define them, but which have now outlived their historical usefulness? If ideology is the medium through which class agents misrepresent themselves to themselves, and is itself an arena of class struggle – a struggle for the reinvention of both subject and object – then what does the Primacy Thesis explain? If Marx's vision of communism was premissed on a fundamental misapprehension of the human essence, then why should anyone fight for it? And if religious, national, and ethnic identities are, as a matter of fact, important, then why should we anticipate that historical actors will discard them at the critical historical moment?

From Inclusive to Restricted Historical Materialism

It is partly in response to these sorts of problems that Cohen has recently abandoned 'inclusive' for 'restricted' historical materialism. Inclusive historical materialism, he argues, is theoretically ambitious, but deeply implausible: it attempts to explain all non-economic phenomena – 'in their large lines' – by identifying their functional role in securing and supporting the development of human industry. Restricted historical materialism abandons such explanatory pretensions. Sensitive to the abundant historical evidence that 'spiritual life' develops – to a considerable extent – 'in freedom from material life', it allows non-economic phenomena to develop independently, denying only that they can actively direct or positively impede the course of technological development.[20] Restricted historical materialism, then, is inconsistent with the Weberian claim that Protestantism was the 'parent of capitalism', but is consistent – at least, logically – with the weaker claim that capitalism was not the parent of Protestantism:

> [r]estricted historical materialism is defensive, since it is content to protect the story of material progress from undue spiritual intrusion . . . inclusive

> historical materialism is offensive, since it seeks explanatory conquest of the spiritual other than for self-protective reasons.[21]

The theory remains an important one. Some 'superstructural' institutions must take a particular form if the required economic structure is to be preserved at all, the legal system being the most obvious example: the premature abandonment of (capitalist) property law would evidently constitute an undue intrusion into 'the story of material progress'. But to what extent is this true of 'spiritual life'? To begin with, it is reasonable to suppose that grossly inegalitarian economic and social structures will require some ideological justification if they are to maintain the allegiance of the exploited class. Moreover, as Cohen argues, economic development will often require the redirection of spiritual life, if only in order to avoid being redirected by it. For example, capitalism would be under threat from a Christian church that took its own founding texts too seriously – the clergy must find some way of passing mill owners, currency speculators, and the leaders of the Free World through the eyes of needles. A materialist explanation of 'spiritual life' is required, then, because the development of human industry often presupposes the redirection of (say) institutionalised religion, if only to ensure that religions do not develop in ways that have the effect of actively hindering technological progress.

Is this retreat consistent with 'what Marx wrote'? Cohen is quite candid here: Marxism's founders were in fact committed to an inclusive historical materialism, but they were wrong to be so committed. Construed in this way, Karl Marx's theory of history is finally indefensible.[22] However, Cohen proceeds to argue that the position set out in the 1859 Preface is broadly consistent with a restricted interpretation of the theory on two conditions. Firstly, one of the best-known claims must be dropped from the Preface: there is no tenable restricted reading of the assertion that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'.[23] Secondly, the concept of a 'superstructure' is not to be taken to refer to all non-economic phenomena, but only to those phenomena 'whose character is explained by the economic structure'.[24] Marx, then, was not a restricted historical materialist, but this reading is more or less consistent with most of what he wrote.

Why did Marx commit himself to an implausible theory of history? The Hegelian philosophy of history had conceived all material phenomena ('being') to be mere manifestations of Mind ('consciousness'). Its inversion, then, yields precisely the proposition that 'social being

determines consciousness'. Cohen concludes that 'instead of turning him upside down, or right side up, Marx would have done better, after toppling Hegel, to leave him lying there on a horizontal plane'.[25] Better to let dead dogs lie.

But Marx's writings seldom suggest a literal inversion, plus an essentially mechanistic interpretation, of the Hegelian dialectic. On the contrary, this is refuted by Marx's theoretical practice, and Marxism's founders explicitly denied that their theoretical pretensions were ever so inflated.[26] As Cohen himself recognises, Marx was quite clear that spiritual phenomena are not infrequently the product of 'the free spiritual production of [a] particular social formation'.[27] Historical materialism never was that offensive; it did not seek the explanatory conquest of the entire world of spiritual phenomena. (Indeed, if Cohen is *retreating* from an inclusive version of historical materialism in this sense, he is probably the only Western Marxist philosopher of late to have defended such an interpretation.) The move from 'inclusive' to 'restricted' historical materialism needs, then, some further justification than the mere recognition that 'spiritual' development is not exclusively determined by material development.

Indeed, the very distinction between the two interpretations is now unclear. Cohen's own formulation suggests that the crucial distinction is between theoretical 'offence' and theoretical 'defence'. Inclusive historical materialism will sometimes venture a materialist explanation of non-economic phenomena where restricted historical materialism is content to remain silent. But when? Both versions recognise that non-economic phenomena not infrequently develop independently of the economic base; nor are such developments historically insignificant ones – this is true of the geographical partition of Germany instanced by Engels in the letter to Bloch. Inclusive historical materialism sought explanatory conquest of 'spiritual life' only in its 'large lines'.[28] There is room here, then, for disagreements concerning how large these lines are to be. Alternatively, the distinction might be understood to be between an 'inclusive' theory attempting to demonstrate that non-economic phenomena actively help material development, and a 'restricted' theory content to demonstrate only that these same non-economic institutions and processes do not actually hinder that development. But on Cohen's own construal of Marx's theory of history, it is difficult to see how this distinction could even be made. Do we begin by identifying a general trajectory of technological development, and then consider the impact of non-economic institutions and processes upon this independent developmental trajectory?

This points up another difficulty for Cohen: if the productive forces

expand only to the degree that is possible within the prevalent economic structure, then is not the independent variable the relations of production and not the forces? In what sense can we now say that the productive forces have an *autonomous* tendency to develop, which is merely facilitated by the prevalent economic structure? Cohen has argued that this problem dissolves once the proposition that there is a *tendency* for the productive forces to develop is properly understood. He had failed to clarify this point adequately in *KMTH*. He had intended to argue there that this was a *normally fulfilled* tendency: the evidence for this being the 'striking historical datum' that technological regression is a rare phenomenon. While it might not be in the interests of pre-capitalist ruling classes actively to develop more efficient means of production, no ruling class will actually abandon improved productive forces. However, this evidence does not obviously support the claim that the tendency identified by the Development Thesis is normally operative. The development of the productive forces might indicate nothing more than that successive economic structures have, as a matter of fact, been favourable to economic development. This explanation would be consistent both with the assertion that the productive relations are the independent variable; and with denial of the asocial premisses of the Development Thesis.

Cohen has offered two responses to this objection. Firstly, there is no inconsistency between the assertion that the productive forces have an *autonomous* tendency to develop and the concession that they would not develop at all in the absence of economic structures which facilitated this development: '[a] child has an autonomous tendency to grow up . . . [b]ut it does not follow that he has a tendency to grow up autonomously, where that means independently of parental or other assistance'.[29] Secondly, he argues that the claims about human nature which underwrite the Development Thesis provide the best available explanation of the fact that economic structures which have facilitated – or, at least, not impeded – technological development have in fact been operative throughout history. He challenges his detractors to 'either accept that the asocial premisses have great explanatory power, or offer an alternative explanation of the contrast between frequency of progress and infrequency of regress'.[30]

For our current purposes the important point is that no conceivable economic structure could ever hinder technological development relative to this 'autonomous tendency'. In the absence of any economic and social structure, there would simply be no technological development. The distinction between restricted and inclusive historical materialism cannot be made in this way: crudely, virtually everything that impacts

upon material development is better – or, at least, no worse – than nothing. But let us recall what it is that the Primacy Thesis is intended to explain: not development *within* any particular social and economic structure, but the progressive transitions *between* modes of production. In so far as we can make sense of the possibility of non-economic phenomena actively impeding the development of human industry, this must be because they restrain technological development relative to what it could be after the revolutionary transition to a higher mode of production. The 'undue spiritual intrusion' proscribed by restricted historical materialism would occur where spiritual beliefs and institutions hindered not only technological development *per se* but also the formation of a revolutionary class. Restricted historical materialism rules out (indefinite) fettering of the productive forces by 'spiritual life', but then – so far as the really crucial questions are concerned – it has identical explanatory ambitions to those of inclusive historical materialism.

We might doubt that the distinction between inclusive and restricted historical materialism can be clearly made. But even if it can, it is simply irrelevant to the most serious problems with Cohen's position that have now been identified: the problem of class formation and class capacity; the difficulties of interpreting 'fettering' in such a way as to rescue the central claims of orthodox historical materialism; and the explanatory salience and existential resonance of non-class identities and non-economic institutions and processes.

From Technological Determinism to Weak Historical Materialism

Cohen's recent efforts to revise and defend orthodox historical materialism simply serve to dramatize the inadequacies of this version of Marxism. His 'doubts' regarding the truth of technological determinism are shared by few contemporary Marxists – and by few, if any, advocates of Rational Choice Marxism: '[i]n the face of orthodox historical materialism's evident implausibility, many Marxists have abandoned the Marxist theory of history altogether. Both the Primacy Thesis and the Base/Superstructure Thesis are now almost universally rejected.'[31] But if historical materialism – in this 'evolutionary' guise – is now well and truly finished, is it possible to salvage any distinctively Marxist theory of history? In *Reconstructing Marxism*, Wright, Levine and Sober seek to develop a recognisably Marxist theory of history – 'weak historical materialism' – responsive to precisely those objections

that fatally undermine orthodox historical materialism in its Cohenite version.

Central to their reconstruction is the rejection of 'orthodox historical materialism' in favour of a theory of 'historical trajectories'.[32] The most obvious problem with technological determinism was the assumption that what was *necessary* for some progressive social transition – its material preconditions – was also *sufficient*: for example, that capitalism will come to fetter technological development, and a revolutionary working class will then, on historical cue, rise up and overthrow it. Technological determinism is 'a theory of historical inevitability, of an unavoidable sequence of epochal stages': 'for orthodox historical materialists . . . the *possibility* of change along the depicted trajectory is, in the long run, *sufficient* for the indicated change to occur'.[33] Technological determinism – in either 'inclusive' or 'restricted' form – is therefore ultimately indefensible. A particular emphasis is placed upon the problems of class formation and class capacities. Even if 'fettering' occurs, this is clearly not sufficient for the formation of a revolutionary class possessing the *capacities* – material, ideological, organisational, etc. – to execute a social revolution.

However, the denial of historical *inevitability* is consistent with the assertion of historical *directionality*. Weak historical materialism claims that social formations are ordered in non-arbitrary ways, but not that any particular historical sequence is uniquely and universally prescribed. 'Multiple routes into the future' open up at the critical historical junctures.[34] This revision of orthodox historical materialism does not abandon a distinctively Marxist theorisation of epochal social transition either for crude voluntarism or – *pace* Giddens[35] – for a theory of historical 'episodes'. Not just anything is possible at the critical moments, and we are typically not at a critical juncture. The necessary material preconditions must be produced before progressive social transformation becomes an historical possibility; historical development is biased in a definite direction; and revolutions are prosecuted by social classes. All this is consistent with orthodox historical materialism. What is denied is only that the necessary material preconditions required for an epochal social transformation are sufficient to engender it.[36]

History has weak directionality as a consequence of a weak tendency towards technological development. Whereas Cohen appealed to the (allegedly) transhistorical human interest in the conquest of material scarcity – in defence of a strong reading of Marx's theory of history – Wright, Levine and Sober appeal directly to class interests in order to identify a 'weak impulse' to technological development, and in

defence of a correspondingly 'weak' historical materialism. They argue that technological development is 'sticky downward':[37] throughout history 'the probability of staying at the same point [i.e. the same level of technological development] is greater than the probability of regressing'.[38] The argument here is straightforward: at no stage in human history does any significant social class or group have any interest in technological regression. This is supported by two further points: (i) that one of the major sources of industrial development is new knowledge, and this survives even the physical destruction of the material means of production – technical knowledge is 'sticky downwards', 'it *can* be lost, but it almost never is';[39] and (ii) technological development produces not only more things but also new needs – needs are also 'sticky downwards'. No class, then, has an interest in technological regression: 'there are individuals – and organised collectivities – with strong interests in retaining productive forces, at the same time that no groups have deep and abiding interest in reducing them'.[40]

At no stage in history will existing productive forces actually be destroyed. But 'sticky downwardness' is – at least, logically – consistent with indefinite stagnation. The required directionality cannot be as weak as all that: there must also be some probability of technological progress. Here different explanations – again appealing directly to the interests of particular historical agents – are required for different developmental stages. In pre-class societies all the producers are direct producers. Therefore, each has a direct interest in technological developments that lighten the burden of human labour:[41] 'the vast majority may not have felt pressure to reduce toil, and they may not have had the capacity to innovate. But when innovations that reduced toil occurred – for whatever reason and however sporadically – they were generally adopted.'[42] It is different in class societies. Technological progress may actually increase the direct producer's burden of labour. In all class societies, however, the exploiting class has an interest in technological development, because this is one means of securing an increase in surplus production. Technological development is imperative for the survival of the ruling class only within capitalist societies; but pre-capitalist ruling classes stood to gain by employing those technologies that – for whatever reasons – became available to them.

Even allowing that there is some probability of technological progression throughout history, this still leaves us short of a distinctively Marxist theorisation of social transformations. The argument thus far shows only that there is a tendency for technological development to occur *within* all social formations. This claim is then supplemented by appeal to Cohen's 'Compatibility Thesis'. Not all relations of production

are compatible with a given level of technological development – slavery, for example, is incompatible with computer technology – and no class society can sustain indefinite technological development:

> We know that there is at least a weak impulse for the forces of production to develop. This impulse creates a dynamic asymmetry in their interconnections. Eventually the forces of production reach a point at which they are 'fettered' – a point beyond which further development is substantially impeded in the absence of transformations of the economic structure.[43]

Fettering brings us to the critical historical moment. Transition to a higher mode of production is now *possible*, we might conclude, in a dual sense: (i) the material preconditions for progressive social transition have developed within the 'womb of the old society'; and (ii) the formation of a revolutionary class becomes increasingly probable. The 'weak impulse' for technological development to occur throughout history plus the Compatibility Thesis support the claim that there is some probability that critical historical junctures will (eventually) be reached, and some probability that – when they are – they will precipitate an 'epoch of social revolution'. Whether such revolutions occur, and what direction they will take, depends, however, upon historical contingencies: in particular, upon the capacities of the rival classes within some definite historical conjuncture.

'Weak historical materialism' diminishes (orthodox) Marxism's 'theoretical pretensions'. But does this diminution finally deliver the requisite plausible – and recognisably Marxist – theorisation of revolutionary social transitions? Consider an 'uncontroversial' assumption: technological development is 'sticky downwards' because no (historically significant) social class has any direct stake in technological regression. Interpreted in one way, this is indeed uncontroversial: the destruction of material productive forces is a marginal – if scarcely unprecedented – historical phenomenon. But technological development is not exhausted by the production and deployment of material productive forces (tools, machinery, plant, etc.); total productive power is also increased by the development of the 'social forces of production' – for example, more efficient techniques of labour organisation bringing about an intensification of labour activity. In such a case the direct producers – at least, *qua* producers – do have an interest in regression to less efficient (because less intensive) 'technologies'. Indeed, on Wright, Levine and Sober's own assumptions, this interest in technological regression is not the exception; it is the rule. This is so given two propositions to which they commit themselves: that direct

producers have an overriding interest in reducing their 'burden of labour'; and that the adoption of more efficient technology often increases their 'burden of labour'.[44] Technological development, then, not infrequently frustrates the interests of the exploited class; and technological regression – whether or not it is *feasible* – is therefore often in the interests of the direct producers.

Consider capitalism: weak historical materialism argues that capitalism's technological dynamism arises given the presence of a ruling class with a (strong) interest in technological development, and of an exploited class possessing no (significant) interest in technological regression. Capitalists are driven forwards; proletarians have no desire to go backwards; therefore capitalism goes (rapidly) forwards. But it is now suggested that workers often do have an interest in technological regression (for example, the disruption of the 'efficient' organisation of the labour process); and they may often certainly have an interest in resisting the employment of new technologies (for example, if these technologies make work more routine or involve substantial lay-offs). Now, this is not to deny what is clearly true: that in capitalist societies 'the probability of staying at the same point is greater than the probability of regressing'. Indeed, in capitalist societies there is clearly a strong impetus towards rapid technological progress. It is simply to offer a different explanation of this tendency: that is, while the exploited class often has an interest in resisting the employment of new technologies – and even in 'technological regression' – it lacks the class capacity effectively to resist technological development.

This points up an important tension in 'weak historical materialism'. While much emphasis is placed upon class capacities when it comes to the theorisation of revolutionary social transitions, the significance of these capacities for the course and speed of technological development within a given social formation is neglected. Moreover, where the exploited class possesses material and organisational strength, it will often be able not only to effect social transition – where this is possible – but also to resist technological development. A strong working class may impede technological development within capitalism; delay the arrival of the historical moment when socialism becomes 'possible'; and, into the bargain, actually incur the blame for capitalism's failures and inefficiencies. Of course, none of this would be true if the aim of the workers was to secure the material foundations for the transition to socialism; but it will be important in so far as particular groups of workers aim, instead, at their own immediate material advantage.

Wright, Levine and Sober are sensitive to this sort of objection. They concede that workers might have an interest in reductions in

productivity where the introduction of new technologies induces substantial unemployment. But they conclude that 'in general no one has an interest in reducing labor productivity *per se*'.[45] But what do they mean by this? Take, for example, the replacement of coal-fired power stations by nuclear ones. This has led to substantial redundancies in the primary-goods industries: 'technological regression' is in the interests of miners *qua* miners, but it is not in their interests '*per se*'. But what are these '*per se* interests'? There seem to be two possible answers. Firstly, that miners have no interest in technological 'regression' *qua* socialists seeking the development of the material preconditions for the transition to socialism. Technological innovations producing large-scale unemployment release individuals from the 'burden of labour'; the transition to socialism transforms this curse of unemployment into an opportunity for the long-awaited emancipation from the curse of Adam. But this assumes that individual workers will sacrifice their immediate material interests to the long-term prospects for socialism; and also warrants the far stronger claim that exploited classes do have an interest in technological progression even where this substantially increases 'burdensome toil'. Secondly, the point might be that no-one has an interest in technological regression *aside from* their individual and class interests. But this implies their removal to some Archimedean point (the relevant 'interests' here are those of an 'ideal observer'). Wright, Levine and Sober's avowed intention is to construct a version of historical materialism that does not appeal beyond the interests of historical agents to the (supposedly) transhistorical interests of mankind.

Given the abundant empirical evidence that capitalism is a prodigious developer of the productive forces, this point might seem a trivial one. But it is of considerable importance given the emphasis upon class capacities. Firstly, as was indicated above, where the working class – or a particular section of that class – is strong, it will be able to resist successfully technological innovations which are not to its immediate material advantage: employing its material, organisational and ideological resources to restrain capitalist accumulation, but failing to launch the struggle for socialism. Secondly, if the ruling class is aware of the threat posed to its interests by a strong exploited class, then it will also be aware that it is not in its long-term class interests to introduce technologies that have the effect of increasing the strength of the exploited class.

Consider again the development of the nuclear power industry in Great Britain. To begin with, assume – for argument's sake – that nuclear generators are efficient. As previously noted, substantial sections

of the working class will have a direct interest in resisting the switch to nuclear generators because this creates unemployment. But now assume that nuclear power generation is less efficient than coal-fired generation: that is, that the development of the nuclear power industry actually diminishes total productive power (it is technologically *regressive*). This may still be in the interests of the ruling class because it has an interest in diminishing the political resources of rival classes, for example, by undermining a powerful trade union like the NUM. Class interests – even the class interests of capitalists – need not therefore always coincide with any general interest in technological development: this will be particularly the case at the critical junctures where the importance of class capacities is increasingly apparent to the relevant historical agents.[46]

These arguments demonstrate that the interests of social classes in securing organisational, material and ideological resources can conflict with their interest in the development of the productive forces. Particularly at the critical historical junctures, the introduction, or preservation, of sub-optimal technologies will often advance these interests. However, while Wright, Levine and Sober do not directly engage with this particular issue, it is unclear how damaging this objection finally is for their general project. In particular, we can concede that there is always a *tendency* towards technological development within class societies – because the ruling class has an interest in technological development – even if this interest is not infrequently overwhelmed by other interests. Moreover, this discussion has concentrated exclusively upon the prospective transition from capitalism to socialism.[47] Wright, Levine and Sober actually concede that they have no more grounds than Cohen had – indeed, they have fewer grounds – for claiming that indefinite technological development is incompatible with capitalism. They reject Marx's special theory of capitalism, and they are also sceptical that a systemic bias towards 'frenetic consumerism' produces, as Cohen had argued, any distinctive contradiction within advanced capitalism:

> While it is not far-fetched to imagine an eventual disenchantment with consumerism in advanced capitalist countries, we would need a much more elaborate theory of preference formation and transformation than is currently available before we could confidently predict that an erosion of consumerism would be a sufficiently powerful force to create a fundamental instability in capitalism itself. In the absence of such a claim, there is no ground for the idea that the development of the forces of production within capitalism has an inherent tendency to lead to a system-threatening contradiction between the forces and relations of production. But without

such grounding, it is not clear that the Compatibility Thesis holds for capitalism.[48]

This is a highly significant concession. Wright, Levine and Sober argue that 'weak historical materialism' requires the truth of the Compatibility Thesis, but admit that this thesis does not hold for capitalism: 'weak historical materialism' takes us as far as capitalism, but it takes us no further. The crucial issue here concerns the sense in which successive social transitions become 'possible'. This might be understood in three different – but not mutually exclusive – senses. First, that revolution is possible only where the relations of production have turned into 'fetters' upon further technological progress. But Wright, Levine and Sober admit that they have no good reasons for claiming that this will ever occur within capitalist societies. Secondly, that one of the indirect consequences of technological development is to produce a revolutionary class with the capacity to effect an epochal social transformation. But this is explicitly denied in the case of capitalism: technological development within capitalism just as often has the effect of undermining the revolutionary capacities of the working class (as a consequence, for example, of labour market segmentation and the increasingly transglobal division of labour).[49] Finally, it might be said that technological development within capitalism is required to secure the necessary material preconditions for the development of a *viable* socialist society; but there is no indication of what the appropriate level of development might be.

Classical Marxism stipulated that the transition from capitalism *via* socialism to communism required the production of 'abundance', because only then could human beings finally be liberated from the 'burden of toil'. But the concept of abundance is simply not comprehensible other than by reference to contestable claims within philosophical anthropology. If capitalism is capable of indefinitely expanding productive potential – as Wright, Levine and Sober (but not the classical Marxists) have conceded it might be – then it will, in a certain sense, be capable of indefinitely producing – and indefinitely defeating – material 'scarcity'. Capitalism perpetuates the confrontation with material scarcity by endlessly manufacturing new 'needs'. It is not, then, material production that advances us from 'scarcity' to 'abundance', but theoretical production – allied to political practice – which reveals perceived 'scarcity' as the ideological cloak for a potential abundance realisable within a socialist society producing in order to satisfy genuine human needs. Regarding the prospects for the transition from capitalism to socialism, even the apparently empirical issue

of what is, and what is not, on the 'historical agenda' has an inescapably normative dimension. In this sense, Wright, Levine and Sober's closing remarks fall somewhat short of the mark: 'For weak historical materialists, historical materialism only reveals what is *materially* possible. But to hold that socialism is materially possible is not automatically to imply that it is also desirable. That case must be made.'[50] But the very question of when and why socialism is *possible* – at least, as this question has been traditionally understood – cannot now be addressed without engaging the normative question of when and why it is *desirable*. Socialism is, in this sense, 'possible' when and because there is sufficient surplus production to secure the satisfaction of genuine human needs.

Three central issues have emerged in the course of our prolonged discussion of the defence, reconsideration, revision, reconstruction, restriction and attenuation of Karl Marx's theory of history: the significance of Analytical Marxism's rejection of Marx's special theory of capitalism; the importance of class formation, class capacities and class struggles; and the increasing centrality of normative ethical discourses to the development of the Analytical Marxist programme. These three issues will be explored in the remaining chapters of this book.

6

From Inequality to Exploitation and Back Again

Neither Cohen's defence of technological determinism, nor the discussion of Marx's theory of history that it was to provoke, directly contributed to the development of Rational Choice Marxism, as it was conceived by Elster, Roemer, and Przeworski. Cohen's defence of orthodox historical materialism had appealed to *transhistorical* human rationality, but this very assumption was attacked by the principal advocates of the neoclassical reconstruction of Marxism. The problem was that, if there was a rational chooser at the heart of Cohen's reconstructed technological determinism, then it was Man, and not men or women – in flagrant violation of the doctrine of 'methodological individualism'. For all the sophistication of Analytical Marxism's inaugural work, the Hegelian 'image of history' reasserted itself as soon as Cohen proceeded from tidying up technological determinism – conceptual clarification and the defence of functional explanation – to defending its substantive claims.[1]

However, the defeat of Cohen's defence of technological determinism was significant for the development of Rational Choice Marxism proper: both because the Rational Choice Marxists' methodological programme was articulated and developed in the course of an engagement with this work; and because the abandonment of technological determinism shifted the emphasis away from the general theory of history, towards the analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the processes of class formation and class struggle: that is, onto ground that was considered propitious for the deployment of 'game theory'. This shift in the paradigm's substantive agenda hardly merited the asides lauding Rational Choice Marxism for its hardheaded critical

reorientation towards classical Marxism. If the break with the 1859 Preface was iconoclastic, then its object was an icon that had been reassembled in the paradigm's inaugural work. The rejection of 'old-fashioned historical materialism' had been characteristic of virtually all serious Marxist theoretical work since the collapse of the Second International – it had survived unmolested only in the work of Marxism's Anglophone critics. Nor had the Western Marxists, for example, dodged the serious challenges confronting Marxism in the twentieth century: there was nothing at all new in the Rational Choice Marxists' scepticism concerning the prospects for socialism or in their willingness to recognise the potency of capitalism.[2] What was novel about the Analytical Marxist turn was the belief that these problems could be illuminated and resolved through the application of rational choice theory: their heresy, if any, was a methodological one.

This does require one very important qualification: whilst the explicit or implicit rejection of a teleological theory of history has been common ground for the vast majority of Marxist theorists, Rational Choice Marxism's rejection of Marx's special theory of capitalism – in particular, of the labour theory of value and of the theory of capitalist crisis – while far from unique to the Rational Choice Marxists, has been highly significant. Conceding and developing the neo-Ricardian critique of Marxist economic theory initially developed by the followers of Piero Sraffa, Roemer's reinterpretation of the Marxist concept of exploitation was to pose a provocative challenge to the central substantive propositions that had arisen in the course of Marx's anatomy of the 'laws of motion' of the capitalist mode of production. In shifting the locus of exploitation from the sphere of *production* to the sphere of *exchange*, and in arguing that the overthrow of capitalism would occur, if at all, not in the face of its economic irrationalities, but as a response to its moral iniquities, Roemer was to set a distinctive substantive agenda for Rational Choice Marxism: rational choice methodology allied to moral advocacy.

Marx's Special Theory of Capitalism

Marx had notoriously little to say about the communist future – confining himself to 'critical analysis of the actual facts' in preference to the concoction of 'recipes . . . for the cook-shops of the future'[3] – and never offered any sustained analysis of pre-capitalist modes of production. His mature work centred almost entirely upon two crucial projects: (i) an analysis of the capitalist mode of production; and (ii) a direct

engagement with social and political developments, particularly in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, both in the form of the analysis of contemporary events, for example, those leading up to the victory of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, and in the form of strategic interventions on behalf of the nascent working-class movement – most notably, his participation in the German revolution of 1848 and his involvement in the Communist League. However, the distinction between Marx's theoretical endeavours – at a level of considerable abstraction from contemporary events – and his direct engagement with those events, while not an unrevealing one, is liable to mislead. The analysis of capitalism was itself an intervention on behalf of the working-class movement that was intended to lay bare capitalism's inner dynamics and give that movement its first clear sighting of the enemy. Marx set out to expose the inherent irrationalities inscribed within an economic system that appeared to be 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man', and that had produced an historically unprecedented development of human industry. He sought to illuminate that night in which all hands were invisible: to provide a theory of capitalism that could inspire and direct the social and political struggles of its oppressed.

For Marx the possibility of the division of any society into classes depended upon the creation of a surplus product and upon the existence of some systemic mechanism enabling one class to expropriate the surplus produced by another class. The possibility of exploitation arose only if a surplus product was created by the direct producers; the existence of exploitation – and therefore the division of society into classes – only if some group of individuals succeeded in gaining control over the disposal and use of a surplus produced by others:

> The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relation of production, and hence also its specific political form. It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers – a relationship whose particular form naturally corresponds always to a certain level of development of the type and manner of labour, and hence to its social productive power – in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form of the state in each case.[4]

On this formulation, it is the relation of exploitation – the specific form 'in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct

producers' – that determines both 'the entire configuration of the economic community', and the particular political institutions and ideologies required to sustain that relationship. While the nature of the exploitative relationship between social classes should be expected to correspond to the level of technological development, the superstructure does not exist in order to promote the development of human industry as such, but to secure and enforce the dominance of the class of exploiters, that is, not in the interests of Man, but in the interests of the exploiting class.

In pre-capitalist societies this 'innermost secret' was not particularly well kept: the relations of exploitation were more or less transparent. The answer to the question of how the feudal lords, for example, secured control of a proportion of the surplus-labour of the direct producers was obvious enough. Quite simply, the lord took the peasant's labour: by requiring the peasant to undertake (unpaid) labour upon his estate, or by exacting a portion of the peasant's own produce, or both. The lord could do this because the relations of exploitation characteristic of feudal societies were sanctioned and supported by structures of rights and obligations which could, whenever necessary, be enforced by direct coercion. Indeed, feudalism was bound to rely more or less directly upon forms of extra-economic coercion because the exploited class had direct access to their means of livelihood, and therefore no reason to offer their services to the lords.

Things appear to be very different in capitalist societies. No-one directly forces the worker to surrender surplus-labour to the capitalist. The proletarian offers her services in the labour market without any promptings from a state that has now retired into a version of night-watchmanship. Moreover, on the face of it, the capitalist pays for the labour that he uses: providing wages at market rates in exchange for productive services. But if things are as they appear, then how is capitalist exploitation possible? If equivalents exchange for equivalents in labour markets, then how is it that capitalists make profits? If there is exploitation, where is it? Marx's efforts to reveal the secret of the capitalist mode of production required an entirely new conceptual vantage point – a 'fatiguing climb . . . [to] . . . luminous summits'.[5] It required, that is, theoretical innovation: the inception of a new problematic.

To begin with: capitalism is an economic system in which all production is the production of commodities exchanged in markets. The first problem that confronted Marx was to discover what determined the rates at which one commodity exchanged for another, or – given that money served as the universal means of exchange – what it was that determined the prices of commodities. Looking back to Ricardo,

Marx answered that rates of exchange were ultimately determined by the *labour time* embodied within the commodities exchanged: aeroplanes have an exchange value far greater than loaves of bread because the production of an aeroplane requires a considerably greater expenditure of human labour than the baking of bread. How did Marx reach this conclusion? He argued that the possibility of exchanging commodities at fixed rates depended upon them possessing some common property: buns, cigarettes, sausages, shirts, oil, coal, looms, ploughs, locomotives, buildings, and so on, had one – and, Marx argued, only one – common property: they were all the products of human labour. Moreover, if the relative value of any commodity was determined solely by the total quantity of labour-time required for its production, then it was only in virtue of the fact that a commodity embodied human labour that it had value at all. Human labour created value; workers created profits; capitalists expropriated them.

Three points must be made here in order to pre-empt some obvious objections. Firstly, Marx did not argue that market-prices would – always and everywhere – accurately reflect embodied labour values; labour values provided only 'the axis around which *long-term changes* in the relative prices of commodities oscillate'.[6] Secondly, it does not follow from this theory that if a huge workforce applied their energies and skills to the task of designing and producing an aeroplane that promptly jettisoned its passengers on take off, then – if only it took long enough to produce – it could be exchanged for a Boeing 707 (or the cash equivalent). Capitalists might not care what is produced so long as they can make profits, but if they are to realise surplus-value, that is, actually to sell the things produced by their workforce, then some consideration of the use-values of commodities is clearly in order. Finally, it would be just as ridiculous to imagine that if one could only find a worker of staggering incompetence and provide him with the most primitive of tools, then one could make an absolute fortune. It might take me a year to fabricate a shirt bearing some faint resemblance to one that could be mass produced in about five minutes using state-of-the-art production methods. My shirt would not therefore have 105,120 times the value of the mass-produced shirt. The value of a commodity is not determined by the actual amount of labour-time expended in its production, but by the *socially necessary labour-time* required to produce it, when using the normal production processes and working with sufficient degrees of skill and intensity.[7]

On first inspection, Marx's recourse to the labour theory of value might appear to deepen his problems in explaining the expropriation of surplus-value: for, were the labourer to be selling labour on the market,

and the capitalist to be purchasing labour at its value, then the exploiter would be paying for all the labour-time subsequently expended by his workforce. Crudely, if expenditure of labour-time is the source of the value of all commodities, and the capitalist pays in full for the labour expended in production, then the existence of profits remains a complete mystery. One response to this would be to argue that the capitalist cheats the proletarian in the marketplace: he does purchase labour, but he secures it for less than its real value. Marx denied this: in the marketplace equivalents really do exchange for equivalents: in this sense 'the sphere of circulation . . . is *in fact* a very Eden of the innate rights of man' [my emphasis]. The solution to this problem – a solution that had entirely eluded the classical economists – required conceptual innovation. Marx argued that it was not *labour* that the capitalist bought at all, but something else entirely: *labour-power*.

What the capitalist purchases in the labour market is the worker's *potential*, or capacity, to perform useful work. He purchases the services of workers sufficiently fit, sufficiently compliant, and with the requisite skills to undertake productive tasks. He does not pay them for the work they will perform: this exists not in fact, but only in potential – indeed, only supervision within the workplace ensures that they perform any work at all. The capitalist pays the full value of the labour-power that he subsequently consumes. This value is determined – like that of any other commodity – by the amount of labour-time required for its (re)production: that is, for a wage covering the value of those goods which workers need if they are to arrive each morning at the factory gates in a condition to endure the working day. But labour-power has – uniquely, according to Marx – the curious property of creating more value when it is *consumed* than it possesses when it is *purchased*. The worker may produce sufficient value to cover the reproduction of her own labour-power in a fraction of the working day – for example, in just six hours – but still have sufficient labour-power to work for a further six hours, that is, to perform labour that receives no return from the capitalist and the products of which are expropriated by the capitalist. The source of capitalist exploitation is not to be found within the sphere of *exchange*, but in the sphere of *production*. Capitalist exploitation commences with the descent of the worker from the Eden of exchange into the netherworld residing behind the factory gates:

> [w]hen we leave . . . [the] . . . sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities . . . a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He who was previously the

> money-owner now strides out in front as the capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning.[8]

The labour theory of value – a crucially transformed inheritance from the classical economists – therefore played a key role in Marx's explanation of capitalist exploitation and capitalist accumulation. Capitalist exploitation is possible by virtue of the existence of a commodity – labour-power – the value of which (i.e., the labour time required for its (re)production) is less than the value that it is capable of producing when it is consumed in the factory (i.e., the total labour-time expended on the production of commodities). The rate of exploitation is therefore given by the ratio $s : v$, where s represents the surplus-labour extracted during a given time period, and v the capitalist's initial expenditure on 'variable capital', i.e., on labour-power, for the same time period. For example, if workers must labour for six hours to secure their subsistence, and the working day is twelve hours, then six hours of their day is spent producing a surplus that is expropriated by the capitalist: the rate of exploitation is one hundred per cent. This analysis of capitalist exploitation was intended both to explain capitalist profits and to provide a vital foundation for Marx's analysis of the internal *dynamics* of capitalism. The terminus of capitalism's 'historical mission' was inscribed within this apparently abstract and formal account of the source of profits, once it was combined with a recognition of the imperatives inscribed in capitalism's systemic logic by the existence of competing capitals.

For good measure, the assumption was thrown in that capitalists – 'in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests' – would act in their rational self-interest. Capitalists must make profits in order to stay in business, that is, in order to reproduce themselves as capitalists, and they will also wish not simply to survive, but also to flourish as capitalists – that is, to maximise profits. How can they increase their profits? Well, Marx's analysis of capitalist exploitation suggests two obvious ways of sustaining and increasing the rate of exploitation. Firstly, they can attempt to hold down, or actually lower, wage rates; secondly, they can attempt to increase the length of the working day or, at least, to block any attempts to restrict it. Clearly, nineteenth-century capitalists were active on both these fronts – for example, in their opposition to the Ten Hour Bill – but there are some obvious problems with both

strategies. In the first place, they illuminate a feature of capitalism which its beneficiaries would prefer to conceal: the fundamental antagonism between the interests of workers and those of capitalists. Moreover, their success depends upon the contingencies of the class struggle (the level of unemployment, the development of trade unions, etc.). Secondly, there are some fairly obvious limitations to both strategies: wages cannot be reduced to levels below those required to reproduce the labour-power of the labourer; and labourers will soon be fit for nothing if they are worked anything close to the absolute limit of twenty-four hours per day. A much more attractive option than either of these is available to the individual capitalist: to employ new production techniques that enable his workforce to produce greatly increased outputs of commodities for the same expenditure of labour-time. The imperative to maximise profits therefore both stimulates the capitalist constantly to revolutionise his means of production – thus giving capitalism the progressive historical role it would hardly have if all the capitalist's energies were devoted to forcing wages down and hours up – and, paradoxically, inscribes within it a systemic tendency to terminal crisis: *the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.*

At first sight, it might appear that if a single capitalist increases the *organic composition of capital* within the production process – in other words, increases his investment in constant capital (machinery, plant, etc.) at the expense of investment in variable capital (labour-power) – then the rate of profit will fall. But this is to ignore a point made earlier: it is not the actual expenditure of labour-power within the individual productive unit which determines the exchange-value of commodities, but the quantity of labour-time which is *socially necessary* to produce them. Imagine, for example, that using the normal methods of production, with the appropriate degrees of skill and effort, each labourer can produce one hundred shirts in the course of a ten-hour working day, which subsequently sell for £5 each in the market. Now, if a single capitalist introduces new machinery which enables each worker to produce two hundred shirts in the same period, this does not immediately make any difference to the socially necessary labour-time required to produce them: that is, to the expenditure of labour-time required to produce them using the methods of production *normal* within this economy. Shirts will therefore continue to fetch £5 in the market. But our lone innovator can produce twice as many as her competitors in a given time; spending no more – and perhaps less – on variable capital, and easily covering any additional expenditures on plant and machinery. Moreover, given her more efficient production methods, our capitalist will be able to undercut her competitors –

perhaps selling these shirts at £4.80 – and still secure a surplus profit. The individual capitalist therefore has a clear incentive to introduce labour-saving technology in order to maximise profits.

The law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall asserts itself because the competitors of this innovating capitalist will be forced to respond by the pressures of competition. Minimally, they will wish to cash in on these surplus profits by adopting the new technology as quickly as possible; more seriously, if their prices are being undercut, their markets captured, and they are therefore threatened with imminent bankruptcy, they will be forced to respond simply in order to reproduce themselves as capitalists. But, as a consequence, exceptional technology rapidly becomes normal technology; the socially necessary labour-time required to produce the commodity within this society falls, and the exchange-value of the commodity therefore falls too. Once the new methods of production have been adopted by the individual capitalist's competitors, the implications of the labour theory of value for an economy-wide increase in the organic composition of capital – that is, for a replacement of workers by machinery – become clear enough: a fall in the rate of profit.

This is easily demonstrated. Let us say that at *t1* the capitalist invests £50,000 in constant capital and £100,000 in variable capital, extracting a surplus of £100,000. The rate of exploitation is therefore 100 per cent (the ratio of variable capital to surplus value) and the rate of profit is 66.66 per cent (taking into account investment in constant, as well as variable, capital). Now, at *t2*, capitalists introduce new technology, thus increasing their investment in constant capital. For the sake of simplicity, let us say that their investment in variable capital remains constant at £100,000 while investment in constant capital increases fourfold to £400,000. So long as the value produced by the individual worker's labour is now commensurate with socially necessary labour-time, then the level of surplus value will have returned (*ceteris paribus*) to its previous level of £100,000. The rate of exploitation is therefore unchanged at 100 per cent, but the rate of profit – calculated on the total and not just the variable capital – has fallen from 66.66 per cent to 20 per cent. Mandel clarifies the central point:

> Since that part of capital which alone leads to the production of surplus-value (variable capital used to buy labour power) tends to become a smaller and smaller part of total capital, because of the fundamentally labour-saving tendency of technical progress – the gradual substitution of dead labour (machinery) for living labour – and because of the gradual increase of the value of raw materials in that of total output: since, in other words,

> the organic composition of capital in its value expression tends to increase, there is an inbuilt tendency for the average rate of profit to decline in the capitalist system.[9]

This tendential 'law' is of crucial importance for the progressive transformation of capitalism from a prodigious developer of human industry to an eventual fetter upon the productive forces. As rates of profit decline to ever lower levels, both the capitalist's capacity and incentive to invest in improved methods of production diminish in tandem, plunging the system into recurrent and deepening economic crises.

Important as the development of this argument was for Marx's analysis of the dynamics of capitalism, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall was not the only explanation of capitalist crisis he offered. Perhaps the wholesale abandonment of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall would not require the surrender of the claim that capitalism is foredoomed to ever-deepening economic crises: advanced capitalism might be economically deleterious, and not simply morally iniquitous, for other reasons. While it would be ridiculous to suggest that, in the absence of this tendency, capitalism would not tend to economic crises, it is arguable that none of the alternative accounts that have been offered demonstrates that capitalism has a *systemic* and *irremediable* tendency to economic crises. Consider the two most important alternative mechanisms which might be identified as alternative sources of the erosion of capitalist profit: (i) that during periods of high growth and high employment, workers will tend to use their economic power to force up wages to levels at which profits are eroded and the capitalist's incentive to invest in future productivity is undermined; (ii) that, in so far as individual capitalists have a clear interest in reducing the wages of their workers, so long as the balance of class power is in their favour, the aggregate wage level will tend to fall, undermining their collective capacity to realise surplus-value – that is, to sell the commodities produced by their workforce in the market. Economic crises might therefore ensue either because organised workers have pushed their wages too high, or because capitalists have kept wages too low.

The problem is that both of these alternative mechanisms might be surmounted by reforming capitalism. In the case of (i), the point is not simply that capitalism's supporters have recourse to strategies that will counteract this tendency – for example, the introduction of repressive trade-union legislation – but also that the blame for economic crises can readily be laid at the door of trade unions. Indeed, as Przeworski

has argued, so long as workers are resigned to a capitalist future, then wage restraint is in their own long-term interests.[10] The case of (ii), 'underconsumptionism', might seem to offer a closer analogy to the case of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In both instances, we might appear to have irrationality inherent in the system due to the enchantment with the 'fallacy of composition': the failure to recognise that what is in the unilateral interests of each capitalist (lower wage rates or technological innovation) frustrates those same interests if adopted as a global strategy. However, there is a crucial difference between these two alleged sources of capitalist crisis. It is at least conceivable that underconsumptionism might be more or less permanently prevented by the intervention of the capitalist state, enforcing the collective interests of the capitalist class at the expense of the short-term interests of its individual members. The problems of the 'decentralised' capitalist economy are therefore overcome by some degree of centralisation: for example, the kind of 'managed' capitalism characteristic of the advanced capitalist countries after the Second World War. But no such resolution of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall can even be conceived. Any such resolution would require collective coordination of the actions of individual capitalists which had the effect of preventing them from seizing and employing more efficient technologies. To attempt to counteract declining profitability in this way would be equivalent to taking a very short cut to precisely the destination predicated by this 'law': the development of human industry would be brought to an abrupt halt.

Marx's Special Theory and the Dubious Failure of Capitalism

Before saying something about developments in twentieth-century capitalism which might appear to provide a straightforward empirical refutation of Marx's special theory of capitalism, the foundational importance of Marx's economic theory for his entire analysis of the capitalist system must be underscored. In a work bidding 'farewell to Marx', Conway asserts that '[t]he rejection of Marx's Labour Theory of Value removes the foundation for his entire economic theory'.[11] Allowing for an element of hyperbole, the point might be made even more forcefully: the demise of Marx's economic theory would kick away a vital foundation for his whole analysis of the developmental tendencies of capitalism – not only of its economic evolution, but also of the corresponding development of the class struggle. Marx is

unambiguous about this in the third volume of *Capital*: it is the relationship of exploitation that reveals 'the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice'. The relationship between capitalist exploitation and the social dynamics of capitalism is a threefold one: (i) the emergence of a proletariat deprived of direct access to the means of its own reproduction – a deprivation requiring the enforcement of laws of private property, etc. – is a precondition for capitalist exploitation; (ii) the immediate source of the conflict of interests between capitalists and workers – between wages and profits, etc. – is inscribed within the relations of exploitation; and (iii) the rise of a potentially revolutionary proletariat – whose interests dictate not simply an economic struggle *within* capitalism, but a political struggle *against* capitalism – is a product of the economic logic of capitalism.

Consider the third of these relationships. The rapid adoption of ever more efficient methods of production induces both a massively increased productive potential and, at the same time, periodic economic crises in which increasingly sophisticated productive forces lie idle whilst millions of people are cast onto the dole queues. But it is not only at moments of crisis that capitalism makes an appointment with its 'gravediggers'. The adoption of ever more efficient (i.e. labour-saving) technologies requires ever-increasing concentration and centralisation of capital – driving small producers out of business and swelling the ranks of the proletariat. More efficient machinery typically replaces skilled labour, reducing the worker to a 'mere appendage' of the machine, with the consequence that she is deprived of any self-fulfilment in her work-activity. Neither can she exact wage levels that reflect premiums on scarce skills. Moreover, if the increase in the organic composition of capital is not offset by a corresponding increase in total productive activity, unemployment rises, both signalling the subjection of millions to abject poverty, and undermining the capacity of organised labour to secure decent wage rates. On this version of the story, the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production are crucial for the creation of the arena within which the class struggle between capital and labour is periodically intensified and fought out: capitalism produces an ever larger and more immiserated proletariat as it is plunged, by its inherent contradictions, into ever-deepening economic crises.

The grounds for a straightforward empirical refutation of the special theory of capitalism should by now be fairly clear. Thus, Conway concludes his survey of Marx's economic theory with the observation that 'the course which capitalism has taken . . . would appear to constitute overwhelming grounds for rejecting this theory';[12] and Mandel, an

altogether more sympathetic commentator, remarks that the 'theory of the inevitable final collapse of capitalism . . . [has been] exposed to ridicule by a monotonous succession of authors in the last decades'.[13] Monotonous this criticism may have been, but there can be little doubt of the seriousness of the challenge. For example, how is one to square the claim that the value of labour-power depends upon the value of those subsistence goods required for its reproduction, and the further claim that workers will be subject to progressive immiseration, with the emergence of the 'affluent worker' within advanced capitalist countries? How can one reconcile the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, with the massive profits that are presently being reaped by multinational and international companies? Without indulging in the blindest optimism, how can one imagine that the prospects for a socialist transformation executed through the agency of the working class are becoming ever-greater in the advanced capitalist countries, when any descent of small producers into the proletariat has been more than offset by the growth of the middle classes (administrators, managers, professionals, technologists, etc.) – the creation of professional undertakers rather than of gravediggers? If Marxists are to retain any claim to the mantle of science, are they not bound to concede that the progress of capitalism represents a conclusive *falsification* of Marx's economic theory?

There are in fact a number of fairly obvious responses to this kind of attack. Firstly, this reading of Marx's theory can be challenged. To take two examples, Mandel has argued that it is only in the *Communist Manifesto* that Marx explicitly committed himself to the claim that the proletariat would suffer an absolute decline in its conditions of existence. Ostensibly similar passages in Marx's mature work – in particular, some much quoted passages in *Capital* – are in fact concerned with the conditions of the unemployed and semi-employed poor.[14] Similarly, Tom Bottomore has pointed out that far from being oblivious to the rise of the middle classes, Marx explicitly recognised the importance of this phenomenon.[15]

More generally, Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production proceeded at a level of considerable abstraction from any actual capitalist society. Of particular importance here is the crucial distinction between the analysis of *modes of production* and the finer-grained analysis of *social formations*. Thus, Wright, following the Althusserians, has observed that there has never properly been such a thing as a capitalist mode of production which was entirely coincident with any given historical society, but always instead some complex of 'articulated' modes of production in a social formation. Within given

societies '[d]ifferent concrete people live their lives within . . . different relations of production'.[16]

The second line of response to these sorts of objections is to argue that they rest not simply upon a *misreading* of Marx's theory of capitalism, but also upon a *misunderstanding* of its central concepts. To take the most obvious example, to argue that the relative affluence of contemporary workers offers a straightforward empirical refutation of the claim that wages will tend to fall to those levels required to reproduce the labour-power of the working class, neglects a point repeatedly made by Marx: that the value of labour-power was determined by the worker's *historical-moral*, and not just *physiological*, needs. If the modern worker is to arrive at the factory gates – or at any other sort of gates – she requires more than a plate of potatoes and a few hours' sleep: for example, she may need an annual holiday, the occasional evening out, and so on. As Mandel argues, people are not just possessed of muscles and stomachs, but of 'consciousness, nerves, desires, hopes and potential rebelliousness'.[17] Similarly, the observation that large capitalist enterprises have extorted increasingly high profits over the course of the twentieth century does not directly refute the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, for the simple reason that this 'law' does not assert that *profits* will fall but that the *rate* of profit will fall.

As well as arguing that many of these objections misunderstand the content of Marx's central claims, it might further be argued that they involve a misunderstanding of the *nature* of those claims. Recall here the discussion in chapter four of the logic of propositions asserting a tendency for something to occur; and the argument developed there that these sorts of claims are simply not amenable to direct empirical confirmation or refutation. In particular, notice that the class struggle is not simply a reflexive reaction to the development of the contradictions inscribed within the capitalist economy, but also impacts upon that development. Labour-power has another unique characteristic: neither sausages, cigarettes, buns, motor cars nor power-looms can organise themselves collectively and undertake a political struggle in an effort to increase their market-prices. Marx repeatedly emphasised the point that specific historical circumstances – especially the class struggle between workers and capitalists – intervened between the operation of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the actual rate of profit. Successful action by workers to restrict working hours or to raise wages would tend to accentuate declining profit rates; successful action by capitalists seeking to lower wages and extend the working day would tend to counteract the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

Bearing all the above points in mind, it might finally be objected that the recent history of capitalism does not confound, but, on the contrary, confirms Marx's analysis of capitalism's developmental tendencies. Casting aside the myopia attendant upon the long(ish) post-war boom, it might reasonably be argued that capitalism's failures could only be imagined to be at all 'dubious' by comparison with the 'chequered success' of previously existing socialism.[18] Thus, Mandel argues that contemporary capitalism is far closer to the abstract model developed by Marx than nineteenth-century capitalism was: small independent producers have largely been eliminated; there has been massive centralisation and concentration of capital with the rise of multinational and international companies; the gap between rich and poor has increased: millions of working people have been cast into pauperism – into unemployment, homelessness, marginal employment, etc.; and, while 'post-Fordism' may have reduced the number of production line workers, it is scarcely more fulfilling, and seldom better paid, to wait on tables, sell double glazing, or dress up as a large mouse and wander about theme parks waving at people. Mandel therefore concludes that 'production of value for private enrichment has become absurd beyond anything Marx could have foreseen a century ago and the world cries out so compellingly for a planned husbanding of resources to satisfy needs on the basis of consciously and democratically chosen priorities that even opponents of socialism cannot fail to understand the message'.[19]

Analytical Marxism *vs.* the Special Theory of Capitalism

But, as the Analytical Marxists are well aware, they can and they do fail to get this message: despite all these perfectly cogent responses, the problem posed for contemporary Marxism by the recent development of capitalism does indeed represent *the* serious challenge to Marxism. These problems concern both the *agency* and the *goals* of any possible transformation of capitalism. Concerning *agency*, one might begin by observing that any abstract theory that seeks to impact upon social and political struggles – to contribute to the mobilisation and development of a mass socialist movement – must correspond, to some degree at least, with the lived experience of historical agents.

The empirical evidence may not straightforwardly refute the special theory of capitalism, but the lived history of the twentieth century – a living of history permeated, of course, by ideology – may have robbed it of any potency as an intervention in the process of political struggle.

Bluntly, those workers whose historical-moral needs are fully satisfied – to the extent that they are provisioned, not simply with a bare subsistence, but with cars, holidays, video recorders, etc. – may be more or less content to remain exploited, or, at least, not be particularly disposed to tread the 'road to science': if appearances are not so bad, then – unless one is that way inclined – why go in pursuit of essences? Indeed, even if these workers were convinced that socialism was ultimately in their class interests, they might be understandably reluctant to forgo all that they have in order to participate in a political struggle that might cost them their current consumption, their future consumption, or even their lives. Similarly, while Marx might have recognised the emergence of the middle classes, there is little indication that he anticipated the scale and importance of this phenomenon: the vast growth in professional and managerial employment creating formal proletarians, i.e., sellers of labour-power, able to indulge in private enrichment 'absurd' beyond anything imagined by the nineteenth-century mill-owner. Moreover, while the progressive impoverishment of the unemployed and the semi-employed poor has proceeded unchecked since Marx wrote *Capital*, it would contradict the entire thrust of Marx's analysis to argue that leadership of social revolution should fall entirely not to the presently exploited, but to those whose non-exploitation was the proximate cause of their impoverishment – who were consigned to that other netherworld that lies without the factory gates. No serious research programme could ignore these kinds of problems: the Rational Choice Marxists are quite right to put them in the foreground; wrong only to imagine that this – in and of itself – represents any kind of decisive break with the Marxist tradition.

For reasons that have been indicated, the question of the *goal* of any transformation of capitalism is, if anything, even more fundamental. The mere confrontation with recurrent economic crises will conduce to mass mobilisation in favour of *socialism* only given two further conditions. Firstly, that these failures are understood to be the consequences of the operation of the capitalist system as such, and not simply of the mismanagement or non-management of capitalism: 'socialism or barbarism' provides an altogether more compelling reason for an uncompromising struggle against capitalism than 'socialism or Barberism'. This is particularly evident in the light of the second point, *viz.*, that socialism would need to be shown to be a viable alternative to capitalism and/or the only alternative to barbarism before the mass of people would be prepared to endure the risks and uncertainties of an epochal social revolution. What Marx provided in *Capital* was an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism intended to demonstrate that its

demise – but not necessarily its replacement by socialism – was mandated by an inherent logic that was ultimately incorrigible via any kind of reform. If the empirical evidence – while indicating some serious problems for Marxism (and for liberal capitalism) – cannot ultimately serve to arbitrate concerning the cogency of this analysis, then enormous importance attaches to the question of the logical and conceptual rigour of Marx's model of capitalism: it is primarily because – alerted by capitalism's 'dubious failure' – the Analytical Marxists have argued that the theory fails against these criteria that they have rejected the special theory of capitalism.

Let us pause to summarise briefly some of the principal objections to the labour theory of value which was foundational for Marx's entire economic theory. Firstly, there is the 'labour reduction problem'. How is it possible to arrive at a homogeneous measure of 'abstract labour' given the heterogeneity of 'concrete labour'? Most importantly, it is evidently the case that skilled labour creates more value in a given period of time than unskilled labour, and that this is reflected in wage differentials – skilled workers tend to produce more value and earn more money. One response has been to treat skill as itself a commodity, as a kind of human capital created by a process of education and training: '[m]ore highly skilled workers require a longer period of training than the less skilled. Their labour power therefore has a greater value, since more labour has been embodied in it in order to maintain them during training. This is why skilled labour "counts for" more than the labour of the unskilled.'[20] But, as Elster has argued, even if this answer was otherwise satisfactory, it would leave two problems unresolved: there is the problem of those rewards accruing to *natural* talents; and also there are those higher wage rates which are not returns to scarce skills at all, but which rather reward labour according to the unpleasantness of the job.[21]

Secondly, Marx argued that goods could only exchange in virtue of their possession of some common property, and concluded that this property must be that of being products of human labour. The leading Analytical Marxists have accepted that commensurability is a necessary condition for the exchange of goods, but have denied that being products of human labour is the relevant property. Elster has argued both that goods might exchange in relatively stable ratios even if no labour at all was required to produce them – for example, in a fully automatised capitalist economy – and also that, if goods are to exchange, then they must possess another common property: that of being both scarce and desired by consumers.[22] Thus Roemer concluded, in *Free to Lose* (*FTL*), that 'the labour theory of value is a supply-side theory, in which

prices are thought to be determined solely by their labour costs; in contrast, emphasising the importance of the degree to which a commodity fulfils desires or needs or welfare in determining its price is the demand side. The correct theory of market price must take both supply and demand into account'.[23]

These, and cognate, points have been examined through the elaboration and discussion of thought experiments: for example, in Roemer's parable of Andrea and Bob.[24] Bob produces bread, Andrea wine. Bob's production methods are highly labour-intensive: he often spends half the night kneading piles of bread dough, while Andrea does next to no work. We are invited to imagine that Andrea commences the vine-growing process by simply pressing a button, and that the turning of grapes into wine (miraculously) requires no labour at all. Bob desires wine, Andrea bread, so they trade. Andrea gets a very good price for her wine, because Bob – deprived of access to scarce land, and desperate to drown his sorrows after long nights in the bakery – has no option but to trade; but Andrea, on the other hand, could spend some of her ample free time making her own bread. Rates of exchange in this sort of case, then, will not be remotely commensurate with embodied labour values.

Cohen has added a further twist to this long-standing assault upon the foundations of the special theory of capitalism. It is commonly assumed that, according to the labour theory of value, labour alone creates value, and that the moral condemnation of capitalist exploitation hinges upon this fact: that is, exploitation is wrong because the sole creators of value (workers) are rewarded with subsistence wages, while those who create nothing (capitalists) appropriate the surplus product. But, argues Cohen, the labour theory of value actually requires the *falsity* of the proposition that '[l]abour and labour alone creates value': 'labour does not create value, if the labour theory of value is true'.[25] Consider the value of any given commodity. Is this value determined by the labour-time that was expended in its *actual* production? No, by the socially necessary labour-time *currently* required to produce it. Inefficient labour, then, does not create value (as was argued in an earlier section); but nor does *efficient* labour, to the degree that current production methods are superior to those that were used when the commodity was actually manufactured. If we imagine that it took one thousand man-hours to produce some commodity, but to produce it now would require just one hour, then 999 of the labour hours that went into its production create no (current) value at all. The value of a commodity is not, then, determined by the amount of labour-time that was required to *actually produce it*, but by the amount of labour-time that would *currently be required to produce it*.

But, concludes Cohen, this does not deprive us of any basis for a moral condemnation of exploitation: '[workers] do not create *value*, but they create *what has value* . . . . What raises a charge of exploitation is not that the capitalist appropriates some of the value the worker produces, but that he appropriates some of the value of *what* the worker produces. Whether or not workers produce value, they produce the product, that which has value.'[26]

The Analytical Marxists, then, have more or less unanimously rejected the labour theory of value and, partly as a consequence, have adamantly rejected the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In *Making History*, Callinicos observes that none of them accepts the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and only one (Brenner) is still committed to the labour theory of value:

> [i]t is difficult to overstate the importance of analytical Marxism's rejection of the labour theory of value . . . and of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall . . . For these two theories – in conjunction with the theory of surplus-value derived from the first and the account of the capitalist mode as a system of competitive accumulation presupposed by the second – form the core of Marx's account of the laws of motion of capitalist social formations, of the dynamic processes which drive them forward and recurrently into crisis.[27]

The adamance of this rejection is well captured by the entry under 'labour theory of value' in the index of Elster's *MSM*:

> Labour theory of value, 127–41; ill-defined because of the heterogeneity of labour, 130–1; plays no role in the determination of equilibrium prices and rate of profit, 133–8; cannot explain the possibility of exchange and profit, 138–41; does not provide a criterion for the socially desirable choice of technique, 149–51; does not explain the actual choice of technique under capitalism, 144–6; ill-suited to the analysis of balanced economic growth, 143; inconsistent with the Marxist theory of class, 325 n. 3; constitutes a weakness in the theory of exploitation, 167, 202–3; vitiates the theory of fetishism, 98–9; vitiates the critique of vulgar economy, 503; rests on obscure Hegelian foundations, 125–6.[28]

Nor is Elster any more charitable regarding the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Marx is guilty of a 'multiply confused argument' which, Elster speculates, may have been the product of 'wishful thinking, an uncertain grasp of mathematics or . . . a confusion between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the domination of capital over labour'.[29]

This discussion of the principal objections to the special theory of capitalism has been an impressionistic one, and I do not propose to enter in any detail into the question of what possible responses might be made to it. Two broad lines might be taken: either Marxists can attempt to rebut these objections, and, while seeking to salvage the theory's essential propositions, do so at the cost of some significant developments and modifications to the original theory; or they might attempt a more or less wholesale reconstruction of Marx's theory of exploitation, altogether abandoning the foundational assumptions and propositions of his economic theory. To take the second of these options – as Roemer has done – not only deflates the theoretical pretensions of classical Marxism, but threatens to leave Marxists bereft of any *distinctive* theory of capitalism's internal dynamics at all.

Before turning to consider Roemer's attempted reconstruction of the Marxist theory of exploitation, it is worth reminding ourselves once again of the explanatory role played by the original theory in Marx's analysis of capitalism. The central points might usefully be made with reference to the rather different senses, identified in the last chapter, in which it might be said that the transition from capitalism to socialism becomes increasingly *probable* with the development of capitalism. It is possible to identify four distinct senses in which this is the case according to Marx's special theory of capitalism. (1) The phenomenal development of human industry under capitalism creates the material preconditions for the advent of socialism. (2) As capitalism develops it is inexorably driven into ever-deepening economic crises, exposing its inherent irrationality and signalling its progressive transformation from prodigious developer of the productive forces to fetter upon the efficient use and/or development of those forces. (3) The development of capitalism produces and radicalizes the agents of its own dissolution: it creates its own gravediggers. And, rather more controversially, (4) the development of capitalism exposes its moral iniquities: for example, the gap between rich capitalists and poor workers becomes ever greater, and successive crises add to the army of the unemployed and semi-employed poor. We shall see that Roemer's reconstruction of the Marxist theory of exploitation fails to encompass points (2) and (3), concentrating upon (1) and, in particular, upon (4) – the injustice of capitalism. Crudely, while *Capital* attempted to demonstrate that capitalism *had* to be overthrown in favour of socialism, and identified the agent of this revolutionary transformation, Roemer argues that capitalism *ought* to be overthrown in favour of socialism, and has virtually nothing to say concerning the development and the radicalization of the class agents of this transition.

Roemer's General Theory of Exploitation and Class

Roemer's theory of exploitation and class – initially developed in *GTEC* (1982), and subsequently reprised and revised in *FTL* (1988) – has been said to represent the *locus classicus* of Rational Choice Marxism. Roemer's starting-point was the wholesale abandonment of the classical Marxist theory of exploitation: of the labour theory of value; the theory of surplus-value; and of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. However, while altogether dispensing with the foundations of the Marxist account of exploitation, and therefore also with the analysis of the systemic dynamics of the capitalist mode of production which they support, Roemer remained committed to the theory's two central propositions: (i) that capitalism is unsustainable because it is prone to recurrent and ever-deepening crises (this is merely asserted: presumably, Roemer considers it to be self-evident in the light of capitalism's historical development); and (ii) that capitalists do exploit workers.[30] While Marx's arguments were fundamentally flawed, some of his conclusions were essentially correct: the theories of exploitation, of class, and of capitalism's internal dynamics were to hang in mid-air while Roemer painstakingly reconstructed their foundations.

Roemer's self-confessed 'heresies' were to be both methodological and substantive. Regarding methodology, Roemer sought to reconstruct the Marxist theory of exploitation through the deployment of the tools of neoclassical economic theory: '[t]he revised Marxism I present is shaped by the insights that the tools of contemporary economics – that is, neoclassical economics – can bring to bear'.[31] Roemer argues that both exploitation and class relationships will arise uncoercively, in 'perfect' markets, as a consequence of the optimising strategies of rational and self-interested utility-maximisers, given only the constraints that they face due to inequalities in their initial endowments of wealth. This points up the intimate relationships between the methodological and substantive heresies of this heresiarch: for Marx, the sphere of exchange was 'a very Eden of the innate rights of Man'; for Roemer, it is, after all, the locus of capitalist exploitation. Roemer has very little to say concerning that netherworld behind the factory gates, that is, about the relations of domination within the sphere of production. Indeed, he argues that capitalist exploitation can logically emerge in the absence of any institutionalised mechanisms for labour exchange – that is, without labour markets – and even that exploitation can arise in the absence of any relationship at all between exploiters and exploited. These arguments are all premissed upon the following

technical definition of exploitation: '[e]xploitation is said to exist if in a given economy some agents must work more time than is socially necessary (longer than the socially necessary labour-time) to earn their consumption bundles and others work less than is socially necessary to earn their bundles.'[32]

Consideration of the simplest of Roemer's models will enable us to get a grasp upon his methodology, and to identify the lineaments of his theory of class and exploitation.[33] We are to imagine a society consisting of one thousand members in which only a single good – corn – is produced and consumed. Production of corn requires only two inputs: labour and seed corn; all labourers possess perfect information regarding the available technologies for the production of corn; all are equally skilled and equally productive; and all have subsistence preference: they wish to produce the unit of corn they require if they are to survive, and to reproduce their initial stocks of seed corn, but thereafter they have an absolute preference for increments of leisure as opposed to any increase in their consumption bundles or stocks of seed corn. The total initial stock of seed corn is five hundred units and there are two available techniques: (i) the 'farm' technique in which the production of one unit of corn requires no initial capital, i.e., seed corn, but three days of labour; and (ii) the 'factory' technique requiring just one day's labour, but also an initial outlay of one unit of seed corn in order both to produce one unit of corn for consumption and to reproduce the initial capital stock. In both cases, the production period is seven days. We now assume that agents with subsistence preferences will adopt those production techniques that will secure their consumption requirements with the minimum expenditure of labour-time. Roemer seeks to demonstrate that outcomes here will all depend upon their initial endowments of seed corn. Given an unequal distribution of alienable assets, both exploitation and class relationships will emerge endogenously as a consequence of the utility-maximising strategies of rational, self-interested individuals. By altering the initial assumptions concerning the distribution of alienable assets, we arrive at four distinct outcomes: (i) neither exploitation nor classes; (ii) classes, but no exploitation; (iii) exploitation, but no classes; and, (iv), both exploitation and classes.

Roemer argues that the non-emergence of exploitation follows if we assume equality in the initial distribution of stocks of seed corn.[34] Given a society of one thousand producers and a total capital stock of five hundred units of seed corn, then, if seed corn is equally distributed, each producer will control one half of a unit of seed corn. What will the producers' optimal strategy be? What combination of the available

techniques will they select in order to produce their subsistence requirements and reproduce their capital stock with the minimum expenditure of labour-time? Clearly, these rational utility maximisers will wish to make optimal use of the (less labour-intensive) 'factory' process, but are constrained by their initial capital endowments from securing their subsistence by working just one day in the factory. They will therefore choose to work half a day in the factory – producing half a unit of corn for consumption, and reproducing their capital stock – and then will be compelled to work one and a half days on the farm. Every agent will optimise in this way: working a total of two days; consuming one unit of corn; and reproducing the initial capital stock. Given a total initial capital stock of five hundred units of seed corn, the production of one thousand units of corn for consumption will require two thousand labour-days each week.[35] The socially necessary labour-time required to reproduce this equilibrium is therefore two thousand days in total: two days per producer. Each member of this society therefore works precisely the socially necessary labour-time: there is no exploitation.

The possibility that this initially egalitarian distribution of capital stock could produce class division is superficially a highly implausible one. However, Roemer demonstrates that, given the assumptions of this model, a division of society into a class of labour-sellers and a class of labour-hirers is possible even in the absence of inequalities in initial resource endowments.[36] Non-exploitative labour markets can arise because agents are completely indifferent concerning *how* they secure their subsistence, just so long as they minimise their labour-expenditure. Possessing only half a unit of capital stock, they will therefore be indifferent between all strategies that secure their consumption bundles for two days of labour-time. Some agents may work up their own capital stock in the factory, but then, instead of working a further one and a half days on the farm, offer to hire their labour at a wage rate of half a unit of corn for one and a half days of factory labour. These labour-sellers will therefore both secure their subsistence requirements and reproduce their capital stock in two days. Each labour-seller will be able to work up the seed corn of three labour-hirers in one and a half days. The labour-hirers can therefore employ someone to work up their capital stock in the factory, working two days on the farm in order to produce a further two-thirds of a unit of corn. All producers will work two days as in the previous model: both labour-hirers and labour-sellers work only the socially necessary labour-time. This model is an important one for Roemer's argument, because it is intended to demonstrate that where initial capital stocks are equally distributed, capitalist exploitation will not emerge even if labour markets, and hence class divisions, do.

Roemer now argues that the introduction of an unequal initial distribution of capital stock provides the necessary and *sufficient* conditions for the emergence of Marxist exploitation. We are now to imagine that ten members of this society are in possession of the entire stock of seed corn – each owning fifty units of corn – while all the remaining members possess only their own labour-power.[37] Roemer argues that exploitation, in the technical sense, can emerge here in the absence of any relationship between owners of capital and owners of labour-power. The ten agents with stocks of seed corn could produce their consumption bundles by working just one day a week in the factory, while those agents without any capital would be compelled to work three days a week on the farm. The socially necessary labour-time required to produce one unit of corn is still two days, as it was in the earlier models. Therefore propertyless agents are compelled to work more, and propertied agents less, than the socially necessary labour-time: there is therefore exploitation without class relationships. Indeed, if we imagine that this society is situated on a large island with factories in the north and farms in the south, it would appear that there will be exploitation even if the exploiters never have any kind of interaction with the exploited, or even if they are unaware of their very existence.

This is not, however, an equilibrium solution. We are to assume that agents are fully apprised of the available options, and to relax the assumption that they have only subsistence preferences, by allowing that if agents can increase their capital stocks without incurring additional labour costs, then they will do so. Owners of capital stock will not now be content to work one day a week because they can improve upon this solution by offering to hire propertyless workers to work up their stocks of seed corn in the factory. Will the propertyless agents be prepared to sell their labour-power? Certainly they will, if the wage rates are anything in excess of one unit of corn in exchange for three days' work, as this will enable them to secure their consumption bundles while working less time than they are compelled to so long as they are reliant upon the farm technology. Equally clearly, and for the same reasons, they will not sell their labour-power if the wage rate is less than one unit of corn for three days' work. The equilibrium wage rate is therefore one third of a unit of corn per day: this is the rate at which propertyless agents are indifferent between working for themselves and selling their labour-power to owners of capital. At this equilibrium the owners of the capital stock will do no work at all. In order to increase their corn stocks – that is, to make profits – they will employ five hundred factory workers for one day a week, producing a total of

one thousand units of corn. Having replaced their initial capital stock, and paid out wages, they will each make a profit of 33.3 units of corn in the first week.[38] The equilibrium solution for this economy is therefore one which produces exploitation, classes and profits: all as a consequence of the uncoerced optimising strategies of unequally endowed individuals. But there is an alternative equilibrium here. Rather than offering to hire labour (the solution on 'Labour Market Island'), the owners of the initial capital stock might choose to hire it out at interest (the solution on 'Capital Market Island').[39] Roemer demonstrates that an identical class structure will emerge, comprising the same three principal classes: capitalists, who optimise by hiring out their capital and living off the interest; proletarians, who optimise by working up borrowed capital in the factory; and peasants, who continue to work upon the farm. Roemer concludes: '[s]o far as exploitation is concerned, Labour Market Island and Capital Market Island are identical: each agent is exploited precisely as much on one island as is his twin on the other. Either the labour market as such is tangential to the concerns of Marxism, or its importance derives from phenomena other than its relation to property and exploitation, for example, domination.'[40]

Man does not live by corn alone, and Roemer proceeds to develop a number of more sophisticated models intended to demonstrate that the same broad results will obtain where agents are unconditional accumulators, optimising in economies in which there is technological progress, and where a wide range of goods is produced and consumed. But these simple subsistence models serve to point up the central theses of Roemer's attempted reconstruction of the Marxist concept of exploitation. Exploitation emerges if, and only if, there is differential ownership of productive assets in the original position. Where there is an egalitarian distribution of property, there will be no exploitation even if there is a labour market; where there is an inegalitarian distribution of property, there will be exploitation even in the absence of a labour market. An agent's exploitation status will therefore depend upon her initial endowment of alienable resources. Agents possessed of productive assets will be exploiters – that is, work less than the socially necessary labour-time – and agents deprived of productive assets will, on Roemer's definition, be exploited, even where there is no direct relationship between exploiters and exploited. However, in order to produce optimal solutions, rational agents will pursue strategies which produce a class structure: crudely, owners of capital will hire labour-power, while those without alienable assets will sell labour-power. Capitalists will be exploiters; workers exploited: the class–exploitation correspondence principle.[41] The initial

endowment structure therefore determines both the agent's exploitation status and her class position: 'this relationship between class and wealth is not one that is postulated initially; it emerges as a consequence of economic activity. Agents *choose their own class positions* – not willingly, but under constraint, as a consequence of optimising, given their initial endowments'.[42] If Marxists are right to be interested in exploitation, then it is not because it has any technical significance as a tool of economic analysis, but because it emerges as a consequence of an inequitable distribution of wealth: '[e]xploitation, in the technical Marxist sense, appears to be an unnecessary appendage to our basic concerns, both ethical and political'.[43]

Roemer had originally been concerned with more than the reconstruction of the Marxist conception of capitalist exploitation. He had sought a general theory of exploitation – in particular, a theory which would provide the analytical foundations for the theorisation of the relations of exploitation that emerged in the previously existing 'socialist' societies: '[Marx] required a theory of exploitation which was robust even when one relaxed the institutional specification of an economy concerning the coerciveness of its institution of labour exchange; we require a theory of exploitation which is robust even when one relaxes the institutional specification concerning the private locus of ownership of the means of production'.[44] Roemer's solution was to lay down the ground rules for a 'game' that could be played either by the historical actors themselves or by the inquisitive social theorist. Any coalition of agents is exploited under the following conditions: (i) that there is some hypothetical alternative society in which this coalition of agents (S) would be better off if they were to withdraw to it with their *per capita* share of some specified asset; (ii) that if they were to withdraw to this hypothetical alternative, then the agents who remained in the original society (coalition S1) would be worse off; and (iii) that the coalition S1 is in a relation of dominance to the coalition S.[45] Whether a coalition is exploited will depend upon how it would fare if it were to withdraw from society with its dowry of some unspecified resource: 'If a coalition S can do better for its members under the alternative of withdrawing, and if the complementary coalition to it, S1, does worse after S's withdrawal, then S is exploited under that particular specification of the rules of the game.'[46]

Roemer uses this model to identify four distinct forms of exploitation: feudal, capitalist, status, and skills exploitation, arguing that the latter two are characteristic of actual socialist societies (status exploitation incidentally; skills exploitation intrinsically).[47] Differentiating between these different forms of exploitation depends upon providing

different specifications of the relevant resource which is at stake when the game is played. Feudal exploitation exists when the relevant coalition can improve its position by withdrawing with its share of inalienable assets – that is, in possession of its own labour-power; capitalist exploitation where the relevant resource is the alienable means of production; skills exploitation where the coalition gains by withdrawing with its *per capita* share of the total skills at the disposal of a given society – that is, where they gain if differential remuneration for skilled labour is eliminated; and, finally, status exploitation where the coalition gains from withdrawal with its *per capita* share of status and position – that is, if unequal distribution due, for example, to the agent's position within the hierarchy of a communist party or a multinational company is eliminated.

This sort of thought experiment might appear to be simply an analytical tool for establishing the justice of particular distributions of resources, but Roemer appears to want to endow it with explanatory purchase by allying his theory of exploitation with historical materialism in its Cohenite incarnation: the ethical imperatives fortuitously order themselves in deference to the necessary succession of property modes set out by Marx in the 1859 Preface.

Roemer sought to accommodate his reconstruction of the general theory of exploitation to the classical Marxist claim that modes of production, and their corresponding forms of inequality, serve a historically progressive function. The argument depends upon two propositions: (i) that forms of property are 'eliminated' when they are no longer capable of serving the progressive function of stimulating the efficient use and development of the productive forces (technological determinism); (ii) that each mode of production is linked with a characteristic form of inequality, and that the transition between modes of production is in some sense explained relative to the progressive elimination of forms of injustice (the theory of exploitation):

> According to historical materialism, feudal, capitalist and socialist exploitation all exist under feudalism. At some point feudal relations become a fetter on the development of the productive forces, and they are eliminated by the bourgeois revolution. Feudal exploitation is outlawed under capitalism. Although the proletarians might not immediately appear to be better off than the serfs because of the non-comparability of their income–leisure bundles, one can assert that quite rapidly . . . they are better off (in our sense, at least) due to the rapid development of the productive forces and the increase in the real wage . . . . Historical materialism . . . claims that history progresses by the successive elimination of forms of exploitation which are socially unnecessary in the dynamic sense.[48]

In the previous section we saw that the classical Marxist conception of exploitation was the crucial foundation for Marx's analysis of the internal dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. If Roemerian exploitation is to claim anything approaching this sort of explanatory purchase, then some link has to be forged between inegalitarian resource distributions, the historical missions of successive modes of production, and the dynamics of successive class struggles.

There are some fairly obvious problems here. On Roemer's account class struggle does not arise as a consequence of the internal dynamics of successive systems of production, but rather depends upon the thought experiments of individuals who have abstracted themselves from dynamic interactions in order to toy with counter-factuals in the privacy of their own homes. Settling down in their studies, they proceed to calculate whether they would be better off withdrawing from society with their fair share of some particular resource. Let us say that they calculate that they – and all similarly situated agents – would be better off if they withdrew with their share of (say) capital. The problem is that this could be true – indeed, it would be true – even if capitalism was in its infancy. The next question is therefore whether capitalism has, or has not, fulfilled its historical mission: 'I may be exploited but is my exploitation socially necessary?' It might be, for example, that all existing members of this coalition could have one hell of a time if they were suddenly presented with their fair share of alienable assets: more or less giving up work and consuming all the available resources over the course of a life-time. But, then, what would happen in the 'medium term'? The heirs to their dowry might be considerably worse off than they would have been if production had remained in the hands of capitalists. A coalition must therefore consider its options very carefully before opting for a package of social revolution: it must ask whether it is exploited; whether the existing mode of production has fulfilled its progressive function; whether it can preserve or replace the existing incentive structures; it must eschew short-termism and consider the long-term consequences of its actions; it must not be reckless – it must work through its counter-factuals with diligence. There is rather more here of the 'veil of ignorance' than of the vale of tears. But this is in fact something of a caricature of Roemer's position: he does recognise these sorts of problems and makes some attempt to tackle them. In a brief discussion of the transition from feudalism to capitalism he argues that, presented with a choice between wage-labour and serfdom, serfs will opt for capitalism because they will be able to secure both higher standards of living and liberation from feudal bondage. Elsewhere he implies that while

epochal social revolutions will not be motivated by elaborate thought experiments, they will be fortuitously coincident with the decisions which would have been made as a result of a studious application to counter-factuals. Revolutions are fought in conscious opposition to particular forms of injustice prevalent within the existing social formation; and as a matter of fact they will more or less coincide with the period of the transformation of property systems from developers of human industry into fetters on the use and development of the productive forces.

Since the early 1980s, Roemer has come to the conclusion that Marxists should *not* be interested in exploitation: either in its classical Marxist or in its Roemerian incarnation. Roemer's starting-point had been to reject the concept as a useful tool of economic analysis: labour-power was not the unique source of surplus-value; all commodities (corn, oil, land, etc.) were exploited by capitalists. Why then should Marxists be especially concerned with the exploitation of labour-power? For two reasons: firstly, because of its importance for explanations of social dynamics and historical development – workers suffer their exploitation and can enter into collective struggles against their exploiters; secondly, because the exploitation of labour-power has been thought to be intimately connected with a whole range of other bad things: the domination of the worker in the sphere of production; the worker's alienation from her own work activity and her subservience to the machine; the injustice of property distributions; the inhumane and degrading conditions of the unemployed and semi-employed poor; and so on. It is of no importance whether oil is kept in dirty and cramped containers; nor will seed corn ever rise up and overthrow its oppressors. Having abandoned Marx's economic theory, the principal reason for basing a theory of exploitation on the exploitation of labour-power must be an ethical one. But Roemer has since concluded that relations of exploitation are not after all an entirely reliable index of the underlying moral iniquities that should be the primary concern of contemporary Marxists. He concludes, in an article published in 1985, as follows: 'exploitation theory is a domicile that we need no longer maintain: it has provided a home for raising a vigorous family, who must now move on'.[49]

We have already seen that, for Roemer, capitalist exploitation requires no tanning of hides: exploitation is possible without any relations of domination within the sphere of production. On Capital Market Island our *dramatis personae* undergo no physiognomical transformations: the capitalist rentier does not march ahead of the worker, he marches off; rather than leading her into the sphere of

production, he leaves her to it. Recall also the subsistence economy in which a class structure arises despite an egalitarian distribution of corn stocks: agents are no better off working on the farm than they are if they hire their labour-power and work up other people's stocks of seed corn. Everyone still works two days and ends up with the same stock of corn and everyone's happy. Now, according to the classical Marxist position the labour-seller is exploited here – receiving only one third of a unit of corn in wages each day, but producing three times as much. Two-thirds of a unit of corn is therefore 'pumped out' of the immediate producer by the labour-hirer, even as these 'exploiters' busy themselves on the farm. But, argues Roemer, it is hardly credible to claim that there is anything ethically wrong with this arrangement. Everyone continues to work socially necessary labour-time, and the whole cycle opens and closes with a completely egalitarian distribution of resources. Exploitation need not coincide with relations of domination because it can get along without labour markets; it need not coincide with an unjust distribution of resources because labour markets can get along without exploitation in the classical Marxist sense.

However, there is a further problem here which has greatly occupied Roemer since he initially elaborated his own general theory of exploitation: the possibility of resource-poor agents exploiting resource-rich ones. Roemer develops the point through a return to the corn model, altering only the initial assumptions regarding the agent's preferences. Adam is rich in corn – to the tune of three bundles – but he aspires to become a veritable corn tycoon: he'd work every god-given hour if this would enable him to increase his corn stocks. Karl, on the other hand, has only one bundle of corn, but is sick of spending a whole day in the factory reproducing his corn stock – he'd settle for just two-thirds of a unit of corn if only he could get Mondays to himself. Adam and Karl have an idea. Why shouldn't Karl lend his capital stock to Adam? Adam could pay Karl two-thirds of a bushel a week as interest on this loan, keeping one-third of a bushel of corn for himself. This would be an equilibrium solution: Karl gets to consume two-thirds of a bushel of corn without working at all (which he prefers to a day's factory work and a whole bushel of corn); Adam gets to keep three and a third bushels of corn, but now works four days a week (which he prefers to working three days and ending up with just three bushels of corn). Adam and Karl's behaviour is a caution to Marxists with any residual interest in exploitation: '[o]n what basis can we condemn this exploitation? Not on the basis of domination or alienation . . . and surely not on the basis of differential ownership of the means of production, since the exploitation is going the wrong way.'[50] Should Marxists be

interested in exploitation? No. What is left of the special theory of capitalism once it has been reconstructed using 'contemporary tools of logic, mathematics, and model building'?[51] A 'vigorous family' of theories of justice preparing to leave home.

Should Marxists be Interested in Roemer?

The critical reception accorded to Roemer's theory was, in some respects, similar to that which greeted Cohen's defence of technological determinism: admiration for the brilliance of its execution, combined with a deep scepticism regarding both its methodological assumptions and its substantive conclusions. However, while many of the most vocal critics of Cohen's work were themselves aligned with the rational choice paradigm – indeed, it was precisely their commitment to rational choice theory that informed many of their objections to this defence – Roemer's critics were often profoundly hostile to the very project of a 'neoclassicist' reconstruction of Marxism. For example, Lebowitz argued that, if Roemer was its exemplar, then Rational Choice Marxism was 'in essence *anti*-Marxist'.[52] The conditional clause is important here. Lebowitz had no problems with the rationality assumption or with game theory as such, but only with the neoclassicist depiction of the 'individual' as an atomistic agent, ontologically prior to society: 'there is nothing inconsistent with Marxism in an approach that *begins from the specification of a given set of relations of production* and then proceeds to explore how the particular actors will behave rationally, giving rise to dynamic properties (the laws of motion) inherent in the particular structure' [my emphasis].[53] However, Lebowitz proceeds to argue that '[m]any Marxists . . . will find the idea that "society" is an appropriate victim of Occam's Razor rather troublesome'.[54]

There have been two principal objections to Roemer's neoclassicist methodology: (i) that his starting-point *is* the pre-social 'individual'; and (ii) that his starting-point is *not* (really) the pre-social 'individual'. The first line of attack concludes with the observation that Roemer's point of arrival was Marx's point of departure: the second with the altogether more damning objection that Roemer sets out from Marx's point of departure and arrives at Marx's point of departure. Everything hinges on Roemer's conception of the 'methodological individual'. In developing the corn-economy models, Roemer posited a thousand unequally endowed individuals: there were apparently no prior social relations between them; they shared only an island, a farm and a factory; in so far

as they formed a distinct social grouping at all, it was only in virtue of their geographical proximity and their access to the same corn-producing technologies. In their efforts to optimise under these constraints, they proceeded to generate both exploitation and a class structure: 'We do not postulate *a priori* that certain producers are 'proletarians' and others are 'pure capitalists' or 'petty bourgeoisie'; rather, we let that emerge from the operation of the economy, as agents optimize given their constraints and the markets they can use.'[55]

The problem is to fathom out what sort of a claim this is intended to be. It is a complete non-starter if it is intended as historical explanation:

> has history presented us with a group of atomistic individuals who have no prior connections, no prior interactions – individuals who are ontologically prior to society? Obviously not, what we have here, rather, is that an analyst has decided to model the individuals as if they were initially outside society, and then enter into society to exchange. The starting point, then, is not history, but history mediated by an ideological assumption.[56]

Capitalism did not emerge as a consequence of the optimising strategies of pre-social individuals; it emerged out of the struggles between feudal classes, and between these classes and an emergent bourgeoisie. Allowing Brenner's version of the history of this transition, we can allow that the emergence of capitalism was an unintended consequence of a 'game' played – under definite social and historical conditions – between *the* rational serf and *the* rational lord. But the pre-social individual is, by definition, incapable of participating in such a 'game'.

We should conclude, perhaps, that Roemer is not offering an historical explanation of the emergence of capitalism, but something entirely different. Most obviously, this thought experiment is intended to inform discourses concerned with the ethical status of capitalist relations. On this account, Roemer is working in the tradition of social contractarianism extending from Hobbes to Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. In its classical form this approach proceeds as follows: first, imagine a group of individuals who have been abstracted from any particular set of economic and social relations; these pre-social individuals are assumed to be 'rational', in the 'thin sense' that they will only contract into a particular society if it is in all their interests; it is then demonstrated that such individuals would contract into a specific type of society, and therefore – because, under the appropriate conditions they would choose to contract into this society – that this justifies and legitimises the social and political institutions characteristic of such a

society. Individuals here are not *pre*-social, but *non*-social; they are recognised to be mere abstractions and their 'choices' are intended, not to explain the emergence of any *actual* society, but to trace the contours of the *good* society. Now, while there are clear parallels between Roemer's general theory and social contractarianism, his relationship to this tradition is a somewhat ambiguous one. While liberal contractarians have been preoccupied with ensuring that the original position is a fair one – and therefore that agreements reached in it are also fair – Roemer inverts this procedure by showing that non-social individuals will contract into capitalism only if the original position is *unfair*.

This makes much more sense of Roemer's arguments, but serious problems remain. Most significantly, Roemer's principal objection to capitalism appears to be not so much that unequally endowed 'individuals' would *choose* capitalism, but that, being unequally endowed, they would have *no choice but* capitalism. This is presumably the basis of his attack upon capitalism, and also serves to explain why it is that some individuals in actual capitalist societies sell their labour-power: not because they choose to, but because they have to; they are not properly 'free to lose', because they cannot win.

This brings us to the second objection to Roemer's methodological procedures: that he does not *really* begin with unequally endowed, pre-social individuals. Confidently declaring that he has produced capitalism out of nothing, he has done nothing more than produce capitalism out of capitalism. Let us return to the corn economy model in which an inegalitarian distribution of the corn stock allegedly produces both exploitation and a capitalist class structure. Now, if there was no social structure here, one option open to rational individuals, who wanted to secure their weekly supply of corn and avoid working for it, would be to steal corn. We must therefore assume that Roemer would grant that there are social and political institutions on the island capable of enforcing laws that protect private property: this is not a pre-social 'state of nature' but a proto-capitalist system of property.

But this system of property is a decidedly odd one: it combines private property in the disposition of consumption goods and raw materials (corn and seed corn), with public ownership of the means of production (the factory and the farm). This is not therefore yet a capitalist economy, but it is an impossible one. If the means of production are publicly owned, then how does it come about that the fruits of production have been privately appropriated? How is the initial inequality in productive resources generated and legitimated in the first place? Perhaps we are to imagine that the factory and the farm are merely natural (unowned) resources. But this simply thickens the plot. In the

first place, if the 'farm' is simply supposed to designate the available land, then one cannot but wonder who invested in the construction of a 'factory' and why they would want to do so. Secondly, we must ask how our ten corn tycoons ever got hold of all that corn. If we imagine that everyone started out with the same endowments and the same preferences, then, given that they all share an aversion to labour and access to the same techniques of production, no inequalities could ever arise. We must therefore conclude that these corn-rich agents somehow began at the beginning with both the entire stock of corn and the required combination of coercion and ideology to support and sanction this grossly inegalitarian distribution of assets. The plot thins.

The only possible explanation for this state of affairs is that they have succeeded in expropriating this entire capital stock by sheer force. Leaving aside the question of how this minority of corn tycoons prevailed against nine hundred and ninety cornless buffoons, there are two conundra here: (i) they would have no motive for expropriating all that corn unless their interest was in the accumulation, and not merely the consumption, of corn stocks: and (ii) one wonders why, possessed of such staggering powers, they did not seize control of the factory, the farm, and the labour-power of the remaining island dwellers. We are bound to conclude that the only possible explanation for this remarkable state of affairs is the prohibited one: that the owners of the corn stock have built up their stocks of corn by pumping surplus-labour out of the direct producers. But if this is the case, then the model would only be remotely realistic if it assumed precisely what needs to be explained: the existence of exploitation. In this particular case, the objection that Roemer begins with 'individuals' who own *only* their labour-power and with owners of capital, and finally produces wage-labour and capital, is in a sense wide of the mark. Even odder: Roemer begins with agents who own their own labour-power *and* have direct access to the means of their reproduction (the 'farm' technology), and confront those who have somehow got hold of all the stocks of raw materials required to operate the 'factory technology' despite never having gained control of the means of production, and never having exploited the labour-power of the direct producers (or any other scarce capital asset).

The corn-deprived individuals in this original position do not begin the 'game' as proletarians, because they have control over a sufficient portion of the 'farm' technology to secure their subsistence without selling their labour-power to the owners of the corn stock. It might be concluded that they do therefore 'choose' their class positions: in equilibrium, the wage rate is set at that level at which they are

indifferent between producing their own corn on the farm and working up the corn stock of the corn-owners in the factory. But this assumes that they are indifferent between labouring for someone else in the factory and working for themselves upon the farm. This assumption is a crucial one for ensuring that the uncoerced choices of rational actors generate the desired result: the emergence of capitalist exploitation and of the corresponding class structure. But the assumption is hardly a realistic one.

In the first place, as Mandel argues, the historical evidence strongly suggests that institutionalised capitalism will not emerge unless individuals are actually compelled to sell their labour-power: 'The history of Africa, especially of South Africa, but also of the Portuguese, Belgian, French and British colonies strikingly confirms this . . . . If people are living under conditions where there is no *economic compulsion* to sell their labour-power, then repressive *juridical* and *political* compulsion has to deliver the necessary manpower to the entrepreneurs; otherwise capitalism could not survive under these circumstances.'[57] This brings us to a second point: one reason for this reluctance to abandon farms for factories is the very different conditions of production that would normally be expected to distinguish them – in particular, the direct producer's loss of control over her own work-activity and her submission to the relations of domination that characterise the sphere of production within the factory. One of Roemer's key assumptions is that these cornless labourers, once they have secured their subsistence, will have an unconditional preference for leisure. But, then, if they receive their payment in full regardless of how productive they might be in the factory, we should expect them to be inclined to shirk. Moreover, having granted that the owners of corn are now assumed to have accumulation preferences, they will have an incentive to increase the rate of surplus-extraction by lengthening and/or intensifying the working day. It would seem to follow that relationships between workers and owners within this factory will be relations of domination: the owners depending upon constant surveillance and coercive relations within the workplace to ensure that their workers are not shirking on the job. The factory appears to be a remarkably trouble-free place only because 'Roemer's working class . . . enters the "hidden abode of production" intending to do benevolent works'.[58]

The problems in fact run rather deeper than this: on Roemer's assumptions, the owners of the corn stock would be *unable* to dominate their workforce within the sphere of production; and would therefore be incapable of increasing the rate of surplus-extraction except by the development of more efficient productive forces.

Obviously, they could neither lengthen nor intensify the working day, because were they to attempt to do so, all their workers would return to the farm on which they could now produce their subsistence requirements in less time and with less effort. Indeed, it is precisely because the 'worker' is not forced to sell her labour-power in the sphere of exchange that the capitalist is unable to dominate her in the sphere of production. Any proximate forms of coercion here – for example, deductions from wages – are possible only if the capitalist has recourse to the ultimate sanction: sacking the worker and thereby depriving her of her means of subsistence. In Roemer's factory the capitalist and the worker meet on equal terms. However, these points do support Roemer's – frequently criticised – insistence that capitalist exploitation ultimately arises on the basis of relations within the sphere of exchange: relationships which are both logically independent of, and have explanatory primacy over, the relations of domination within the factory.

There are two possible responses to this line of attack. Firstly, we might imagine that the cornless labourers are not paid just for turning up at the factory, but only once they have produced the three units of corn. Should they deploy the factory technology efficiently, this will take them three days; if they choose to shirk, it will take them longer. Given their aversion to work, we can conclude that they have an incentive to work efficiently. The difficulty with this is that the relations of exploitation will be all too transparent: the workers will surely be struck by the fact that they have to produce three units of corn in three days in order to secure just one unit of corn for themselves. Given their aversion to work, the complete absence of any kind of ideology justifying the initial distribution of corn stock, and the availability of an alternative technique for the direct production of their own subsistence, one doubts that they would tolerate such an arrangement for very long. Alternatively, we might imagine that this economy has a capital market instead of a labour market: workers rent corn stocks at interest, rather then selling their labour-power for wages. Clearly, similar problems would arise here. But there are further difficulties with Roemer's assertion of the identity of Capital Market Island and Labour Market Island.

Certainly, capitalist exploitation could arise on Capital Market Island and this fact has a direct bearing upon the actual history of capitalism. Marx acknowledged that mercantile capitalism was characterised by just this form of exploitation.[59] However, Roemer has very little to say about some highly important differences between the systems of production on these two 'islands', while his critics

have often stressed a line of demarcation between them that is more apparent than real.

To start with the second point: many of Roemer's critics have conceded that the presence of exploitation on Capital Market Island demonstrates the possibility of capitalist exploitation arising in the absence of relations of domination within the sphere of production, but have objected that capitalism's fulfilment of its historical mission requires the formal subjection of wage-labour to capital, and therefore the development of a labour market. However, domination within the sphere of production does not require the physical presence of the capitalist, or even of some overseer working on his behalf. If the renter of capital has no alternative means of securing her own subsistence, then she is subject to domination in much the same way as the factory worker is: in particular, she confronts the same ultimate sanctions. The rentier capitalist may leave her alone in the sphere of production, but he will return to collect his interest. For this reason, he is omnipresent. The worker may be forced to work at a frenetic pace all day and half of the night in order to secure her own subsistence, and to pay interest upon the capital that she has rented; should she fail to meet the required production levels, she will be deprived of future access to the means of production. Depending upon the balance of class power, the rentier capitalist will therefore be able to increase both the length and intensity of the working day (and, consequently, the rate of exploitation) by demanding higher returns for the loan of his capital. This aside, the conclusion that labour markets were required for the phenomenal development of the productive forces that has distinguished advanced capitalism is certainly correct. Capital Market Island can be relegated to the historical periphery.[60] One obvious reason for this is that the centralisation and concentration of capital – and, therefore, the phenomenal productivity resulting from the division of labour and from economies of scale – could never arise upon a Capital Market Island dominated by usurers and merchants, Consider Roemer's own withdrawal rules. On Capital Market Island the direct producers might calculate that they would benefit – at least, in the longer term – by withdrawing with their *per capita* share of alienable assets, dividing them unequally, and instituting industrial capitalism.

This brings us to a further criticism of Roemer's attempted reconstruction of the Marxist concept of exploitation – that all his talk of *choice* is merely gestural: '[l]aden with "endowments" in the form of a whole system of social relations and structural necessities, the "individual" turns out to be an embodied structure; and when the moment of choice arrives, there is nothing important left to do.'[61] The cornless

labourers in this model appear to have a choice between reproducing themselves on the farm and selling their labour-power. However, the generation of a labour market under such conditions will occur only if some highly dubious assumptions are allowed to pass: in particular, their total indifference between independent farm labour and factory work. On the other hand, the corn-owners are quite transparently the embodiments of capitalist 'social relations and structural necessities'. To see this, we need only pose the question of why they are so keen on accumulating corn. For Roemer the answer is simply that this is stipulated under the modified assumptions of the model: it is just an initial assumption about their preferences. But this simply begs the question of why the corn-owners have these preferences. Certainly, they have an incentive for employing labourers because they are averse to labour: but why on earth should they want to increase their ample corn stocks? Initially, it was assumed that everyone is content with just one unit of corn for consumption; but perhaps we can grant that – everything else being equal – more corn is better than less corn, up to a point. The pleasures to be had from corn consumption are strictly limited, but we are now being asked to assume that the corn-owner's preference for (costless) accumulation is not at all conditional upon his current consumption of corn. But Roemer has, then, simply built the systemic imperative to accumulation inscribed within the capitalist mode of production into the preference structures of these allegedly *pre-social* individuals: an unconditional desire for more and more corn would be pathological in the absence of any structural imperative to accumulate.[62] Roemer's 'methodological individualism' proves to be something of a sham: he does not produce capitalism out of thin air (or out of 'thin rationality'); he simply succeeds in conjuring capitalism out of capitalism.[63]

Whatever formal interest these models might have, it is difficult to take seriously their claims to explanatory purchase. This is particularly evident when one turns to consider Roemer's withdrawal games and the attempted alliance between his theory of exploitation and Cohenite technological determinism. As Przeworski argues, Roemer seems to have had some difficulty in making up his mind whether he is an ethical socialist or a historical materialist.[64] He attempts to dissolve this tension through a bizarre merger: the successive modes of production order themselves with respect to sequential ethical imperatives. The thought experiments are no longer simply useful tools of ethical discourse, they are now required to be active in history – to figure in explanations of epochal social transitions. Merely to state this claim should serve to point up its sheer implausibility. However, as we noted

in the previous section, Roemer retreats from so self-evidently untenable a position; implying, instead, that there tends to be a fortuitous coincidence between history as it *has* been and history as it *would* have been, had the relevant actors applied themselves to the task of thinking through the counter-factuals.

This is hardly more convincing. Consider two points. Firstly, Roemer concedes that the playing of withdrawal games will have little direct bearing upon the development of the class struggle within capitalism, because relations of exploitation, whether in its classical Marxist or Roemerian form, will not ordinarily motivate workers to struggle against capitalism. Class struggles are motivated by *transparent* injustices: poor wages, inhumane living and working conditions, and so forth. Now, presumably, this supports Roemer's merger of ethical socialism and historical materialism for three reasons: (i) class struggles are motivated by the unjust distribution of resources which is, according to Roemer, the root cause of exploitation; (ii) the transparent injustices that motivate class struggles will be those which are foregrounded by the prevalent mode of production (inegalitarian distribution of inalienable assets within feudal relations, of alienable assets under capitalist ones, etc.); and (iii) the relevant injustices will become increasingly transparent as the prevalent mode of production exhausts itself and its characteristic form of exploitation loses its socially necessary character and becomes a restraint upon the further development of human industry. Various objections arise. Regarding (i), one might ask why it is that workers (if they are not convinced of the systemic irrationality of the capitalist system) would fight to overthrow capitalism rather than to improve their conditions within capitalism – as Przeworksi points out, this has been the goal of most workers' struggles in the advanced capitalist countries.[65] Concerning (ii), we are provided with no historical evidence in support of the claim that (for example) feudal serfs were more preoccupied with gaining full control of their own labour-power, than they were with the quite transparently inegalitarian distribution of alienable assets. All we get are some vague gestures towards the sociology of knowledge. As for (iii), Roemer explicitly states that the conditions of the working class tend to improve as capitalism progresses: but, then, capitalism is more inhumane – and, thus, more vulnerable to revolutionary agitation – whilst it is still in its infancy. The requisite coincidence between the struggle against capitalism's injustices and the exhaustion of its potential can therefore be re-established only if it can be shown that capitalism is foredoomed to plunge into ever-deepening crises. Roemer does not show this.

This brings us to the second problem: Roemer's preferred account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In *FTL*, he argues that serfs will be attracted to capitalism like filings to a magnet – abandoning their plots and setting off to market armed with their labour-power – because capitalists are able to develop the productive forces more efficiently and therefore can offer the prospect of higher wages and living standards. To begin with, this effectively dispenses with any attempt to conjugate the theory of exploitation with historical materialism: serfs are not now motivated by any concern with justice, but embrace capitalism purely out of considerations of self-interest. In the light of the discussion of Cohen's defence of technological determinism in the previous chapter, the other problems with this explanation are readily apparent: in particular, that it assumes precisely what requires to be explained – the emergence of capitalism.

This theory of exploitation is entirely divorced from any theorisation of epochal social transformations or of the internal logic of capitalism. Roemer's reconstructed theory cannot provide an adequate basis for a theory of class consciousness, or of class struggle, or of the internal dynamics inscribed within particular modes of production: '[t]here is in this "Marxism" no basis for a theory of class consciousness or of class struggle, because . . . [Roemer's] . . . agents stand side by side on a continuum: they do not face each other across a barricade'.[66] Roemer's thought experiments begin to look like merely formalistic exercises with very little bearing upon either historical explanation or socialist struggle. This point is underscored by Roemer's recent abandonment of the concept of exploitation in favour of a direct preoccupation with the unjust distribution of productive assets. What is striking about the story of Karl and Adam is its remoteness from the real operation of capitalist relations and its irrelevance to any political mobilisation for the advancement of socialism. In the best analytical traditions, counter-factuals are countered here by counter-intuitive counter-examples: exceptional cases serve to immobilise powerful theories. That the story of Karl and Adam has little to do with actual capitalist relations is evidenced by the fact that the Rockefellers rarely feel the need to moonlight in the local newsagent. But in fact this story has got very little to do with capitalist relations at all, as they were understood by Marx. In the first place, Karl's preference for leisure at the expense of his corn stock is a luxury that no capitalist could afford; within a capitalist economy Karl would be forced to accumulate or face being driven out of business by his competitors. However much they might like to as individuals, capitalists *qua* capitalists cannot opt for low productivity and long holidays: they are compelled to accumulate

if they are to reproduce themselves as capitalists. In the second place, Adam is under no compulsion to sell his labour-power to Karl, because (unlike the proletarian) he is not deprived of direct access to the means of his reproduction. What we have here is two owners of capital, freed from the systemic constraints inscribed within the competition between individual capitals, and acting in accordance with preferences that assume the absence of the very compulsions usually taken to define the capitalist mode of production. A capitalist who does not need to accumulate confronts a worker who does not need to sell his labour-power. A theory of exploitation and class should consider not what agents *might* happen to do, but what they *must* do. The billionaire son of an oil tycoon who works in one of his father's refineries in order to get a taste of how the other half lives is not properly a proletarian. We might say that he is technically exploited, but this should not unduly concern us, and nor should it provide any grounds for a complete loss of interest in the very concept of exploitation.

Roemer's taste for developing formal models of desirable social arrangements – unrestrained by any residual concern with identification of the possible agents of social transformation – has become more pronounced in his recent defences of market socialism. In *A Future for Socialism* (*AFFS*) (1994), he proposes a form of market socialism designed to eliminate inequalities in the distribution of capital, but to do so without sacrificing the (alleged) economic efficiencies attributable to the operation of capital markets.[67] At the core of this project is a proposal for the equitable distribution of investment capital. On reaching the age of majority, all citizens are to be issued with an equal share of investment capital in the form of coupons to be used to purchase stocks in firms. Of course, some investors will secure higher dividends from their stocks than others. To ensure that such inequalities are kept to a bare minimum, both shares and coupons are to be non-transferable – in particular, control over them reverts to the state for redistribution on the death of their holders. Thus, capital markets remain in place, but the inegalitarian distribution of capital has been all but eliminated. Even allowing that such arrangements would involve no sacrifices in economic efficiency, and that such egalitarianism would realise one of socialism's prime objectives, what is really striking about this, and similar proposals, is that no indication is provided of how such 'designer socialism' might motivate viable socialist struggles in the last decade of the twentieth century (or thereafter). What is abundantly clear is that those who currently have an interest in maintaining inegalitarian distributions of existing capital stocks are not going to surrender to this (allegedly) feasible socialism without a struggle; equally clearly, they

have sufficient power to ensure that their interests will prevail even in the unlikely event that they were ever to find themselves confronting a mass movement armed with Roemer's blueprint for market socialism. But, then, what sort of 'future for socialism' do such thought experiments hold out? In a recent review, Wright argues that this model of 'coupon socialism' does socialists an important service by demonstrating that capitalist private property is not 'the only efficient and sustainable way of organising property relations in a developed economy' – Roemer's version of market socialism, then, is a *theoretical* possibility, but not an *historical* possibility.[68] This hardly provides those allied to the socialist project with grounds for excessive optimism. John Gray provides an altogether more persuasive assessment of Roemer's project:

> the most salient feature of the conception of socialism that he [Roemer] proposes . . . [is that] . . . it is not an articulation of the sense of injustice of any people, class or community, anywhere in the world, but rather a distillation of conventional liberal academic opinion, and is the voice of no broader social or political movement of any kind. Roemer's revised market socialism, if it is socialism at all, is socialism with a professorial face. For that reason alone, it is a version of the socialist project that has no place on any realistically plausible political or historical agenda.[69]

Under current political conditions such painstaking elaboration and advocacy of models of market socialism is a largely irrelevant indulgence, providing a telling epithet for Roemer's attempted reconstruction of Marx's theory of capitalism: moral advocacy without historical agency.

7

From Rational Class Struggle to Ethical Socialism

In his ill-fated attempts to combine a reconstructed theory of exploitation with technological determinism, Roemer failed to break Cohen's silence on the issues of 'class struggle, ideology and the state'. This severance of a reconstructed theory of exploitation from any systemic analysis of the developmental trajectories inscribed within capitalism – implied in the rejection of exploitation as a tool of economic analysis, and signalled by the explicit divorce of moral advocacy from any concerted attempt at the identification of the class agency of social transformation – points up two paradoxical features of Roemer's theory. Marx's theory of exploitation premissed a special theory of capitalism that sought to contribute to the establishment of the requisite conjunction between the narratives of history as the progressive development of human industry and of history as class struggle. From the perspective of classical Marxism there is something deeply paradoxical about a theory of exploitation that has nothing to contribute to our understanding of the processes of class formation and struggle.

There is also something odd about Roemer's project from the perspective of the development of Rational Choice Marxism. This is starkly illustrated by Przeworski's attack on Roemer for his alleged failure to embrace a game-theoretical approach: that is, for failing to heed the problems for contemporary Marxism illuminated by game-theoretical analyses, not of counter-factuals, but of real historical conditions.[1] On those occasions when Roemer attempted to invest his theory with any explanatory purchase or political efficacy, he virtually ignored these issues. Discussing the counter-factual withdrawal rules that he appears to think might inform historical explanations, he implicitly assumes

the prior development of class consciousness, and simply ignores the risks and uncertainties that would necessarily attend the real 'withdrawal' of a real 'coalition' from a real society in a definite historical conjuncture.

Przeworski poses a number of questions here which starkly expose these inadequacies. Roemer assumes, for example, that the players of these counter-factual games will concern themselves not with their own interests, but with the interests of the coalition S. But withdrawal from society with a fair share of the relevant resource, even where it is the optimal solution for S, may not be optimal for the individual: for example, the worker's best option *qua* individual might be to try and gain entry into the capitalist class. Even where the individual is assumed to identify her interests with those of some broader coalition, it does not follow that this will be a class coalition: we might develop 'a multiplicity of critiques and withdrawals' – for example, a feminist critique of, and withdrawal from, capitalism.[2] But let us assume, for argument's sake, that the members of our coalition are class-conscious ones. The problem still remains of showing why they should feel compelled to initiate a political struggle against capitalism, rather than waging an economic struggle for better wages and conditions within it, perhaps combined with a political struggle for the reform of it.[3] Let us concede that this coalition is convinced that its long-term interests will be served by socialism. S still confronts some powerful opponents: armies, police forces, foreign governments, financial institutions, etc. Suppose, then, that the members of this coalition believe they can surmount even these obstacles. This would require, perhaps, a violent struggle in which current members of S laid down their lives for longer-term gains – a long run in which they would all be dead. Even if we allow the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism, economic reconstruction on this scale would not augur well for the 'short-term' material prospects of the first generation of revolutionaries. All this and more stands between the isolated contemplation of counter-factuals and the collective execution of the socialist project. Central here are the issues of the class structure of contemporary capitalist societies; of class formation and consciousness; of collective action; of ideology and the state; and of the historical experience of, and the prospects for, both capitalism and socialism.

The Class Structure of Contemporary Capitalism

The special theory of capitalism apparently confronts multiple anomalies which have been seized upon by the tradition's Anglophone

critics. In particular, it has been argued that Marx predicted that the future development of capitalism would lead to the division of society into two great classes – capitalists and proletarians – and that these classes would become increasingly polarised: an ever smaller and wealthier capitalist class confronting an ever larger and immiserated proletariat. While Marx's more reflective critics have granted that he did not claim that these developments would automatically translate into successful socialist revolutions, they have insisted – with some plausibility – that there is considerable evidence that Marx considered them to be not merely the necessary conditions of the coming upheaval, but something bordering upon sufficient ones: all but prescribing social revolution, if not assuring its success. The special theory of capitalism, it has been argued, was the source of a whole set of falsifiable propositions, but it has subsequently been shown to be false. Rather than the polarised division between workers and capitalist predicted by Marxism's founders, the twentieth century has witnessed the growth of professional, managerial, technocratic and bureaucratic occupations; while the working class has not been degraded and immiserated, but provisioned with consumer durables. In the version currently popular with capitalism's triumphalists, the worker-customer of a classless society has greeted the dawn of post-history and settled down in front of the VCR.[4] The only chains that the workers of the world now stand to lose are their supermarket chains – and then merely to the hypermarkets.

The first line that might be taken in response to this sort of attack is that the argument is premissed upon a misrepresentation of Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production: for example, as noted in the previous chapter, it is argued that Marx predicted not the *absolute* immiseration of the working class, but only its *relative* impoverishment. Some winnable border skirmishes might be fought on this terrain, but this response is inadequate to repel the central thrust of these objections. Marx repeatedly committed himself to the claim that the development of capitalism would be accompanied by class polarisation. This position is most adamantly stated in the *Communist Manifesto*: '[s]ociety as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat';[5] as the 'class struggle near[ed] its decisive hour' this polarisation assumed 'a violent, glaring character'.[6] Perhaps this political pamphlet is an unreliable witness. Unfortunately, much the same position is to be found in some of Marx's most self-consciously theoretical works. The incomplete fragment on classes that closes the third volume of *Capital* commences with the concession that

even in England 'intermediate strata . . . obliterate lines of demarcation'. But Marx continues: 'this is immaterial to our analysis. We have seen that the continual tendency and law of development of the capitalist mode of production is more and more to divorce the means of production from labour and more and more to concentrate the scattered means of production into large groups, thereby transforming labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital.'[7] It seems reasonable to contend that both Marx's experience of nineteenth-century capitalism and his analysis of the capitalist mode of production led him to believe that the development of capitalism would be attended by increasing class polarisation. Moreover, this anticipated trajectory was of central importance for Marx's analysis of class formation. Centralisation and concentration of capital would bring workers together and give them a sense of common interest and purpose; the increasingly precarious and inhumane conditions of their existence would compel them to undertake local struggles for improved wages and conditions: struggles that would inexorably develop into political struggles between social classes.

An alternative response (alluded to in the previous chapter) is to argue that once we have awakened ourselves from the VCR-induced delirium of 'post-industrialism', we will see that the current trajectory of advanced capitalism in fact confirms the striking and novel predictions inferred from the special theory of capitalism. Again, this line is not an entirely fruitless one, but it is not without its difficulties. Consider Mandel's defence of this kind of position. For example, he argues that an increasing centralisation and concentration of capital have in fact occurred. This is true enough. But there have also been countervailing tendencies that bring into question the real significance of these developments for the processes of class formation and struggle. For example, this has been accompanied in recent decades by the relative demise of large-scale manufacturing industry and the corresponding growth of relatively small-scale service industries; there has also been a corresponding development in the international division of labour and the transnational division of capital, undermining the organisational capacities of the working class movement (capital global; labour national).

Mandel also argues that Marx anticipated the relative, not absolute, impoverishment of the working class, and that this has indeed occurred: the gap between rich capitalists and poor workers has widened, while the worker's needs as a human being continue to be denied. Again, this may be true, but it is still not an adequate response to the problems of class agency which contemporary capitalism poses

for contemporary Marxism. As Przeworski observes: '[i]n 1848 one simply knew who were the proletarians. One knew because all the criteria – the relation to the means of production, manual character of labour, productive employment, poverty and degradation – all coincided to provide a consistent image.'[8] This image is now a barely discernible one. Try telling a PR consultant, or a retail manager, or your dentist, that capitalism is offering her just two alternatives: 'combat or death: bloody struggle or extinction'.[9] Mandel fails to confront these sorts of problems. If the proletariat remains for him the agent of socialist transformation – at least, in the advanced capitalist countries – it is because it compares its conditions with those of the distant rich, contemplates its real needs, and harkens to the cries of a world (mysteriously) convinced of the urgent need for a 'planned husbanding of resources'.

There is, however, an alternative – or supplementary – response here, which offers the prospect of a far more fruitful and fundamental defence of Marx's analysis. Firstly, it is pointed out that Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production was conducted at a high level of abstraction from any actually existing capitalism. He was concerned with the analysis of the basic tendencies inscribed within 'the capitalist system': tendencies that could be counteracted by the contingencies attendant upon the development of particular capitalisms. For example, while the special theory projected that the advance of capitalism would bring about the 'immiseration' of the proletariat, Engels recognised that this tendency had been offset in England due to its hegemony within the world market: 'the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies'.[10] Secondly, the all-important distinction between modes of production and social formations must, once again, be drawn. Both the historical works and the political activities of Marxism's founders underscored this crucial distinction.

In his writings on French and English politics, Marx proved to be well aware that no abstract theory could produce the complex conjunctural class maps required for the analysis of determinate social formations. In these historical works, Marx presents us, not with two polarised classes, but a complex topography of fractions, factions, social categories, strata and other actors on the political stage'.[11] The remnants of feudalism haunted the dawnings of capitalism in mid-nineteenth-century France; the major classes were not monolithic entities with indistinguishable interests and objectives – for example, the interests of finance capital and industrial capital were often in conflict. Similarly, in his analysis of English capitalism, Marx recognised

that common interests had driven the principal classes – landowners, capitalists and proletarians – into a variety of political alliances for the attainment of proximate objectives: for example, capitalists and workers united in order to oppose the Corn Laws, and landowners and workers fought for the introduction of the Ten Hour Bill. In an illuminating discussion of Marx's politics, Gilbert adds that Marx's own political activities 'fail to jibe with economic determinist preconceptions'. For example, Marx led the radical wing during the German democratic revolution in the belief that, despite its economic backwardness, Germany was not only ripe for democratic revolution, but also for an 'immediately following' proletarian revolution, and he organised his first communist rally not in England, among the industrial workers of London or Manchester, but in Germany, among the peasants of rural Worringen.[12]

While all this is both true and significant, the central problem remains unresolved: while we should indeed distinguish between Marx's abstract analysis of capitalism and his conjunctural analyses of specific social formations, the relationship between these two forms of investigation is far from clear. For example, it would be as misleading to concentrate entirely upon Marx's politics, while ignoring his more abstract theorisation of the capitalist mode of production, as it would be to disregard his political activities. True, the special theory of capitalism identifies only tendencies that might be counterbalanced by contingencies, but, if the theory is to retain any real explanatory force, then it surely requires that these tendencies are normally fulfilled – or, at least, eventually fulfilled – ones. If the Bolshevik Revolution (or the organisation of the peasants of Worringen) constituted, in Gramsci's phrase, a 'revolution against *Capital*', then what significance does Marx's anatomy of the capitalist mode of production finally possess for socialist politics?

This problem has been the central one for Wright in his attempts to get to grips with the class structures of contemporary capitalism. Wright is well aware that Marx's analysis of class structures and class formations was conducted at two distinct levels: (i) Marx analysed the structures and developmental tendencies of 'modes of production'; and (ii) he also considered the problems of class formation and struggle though a close study of historically concrete 'social formations'. However, argues Wright in *Classes*, Marx consistently neglected the problem of the precise relationship between these two levels of analysis, because he was convinced that historical conditions would increasingly correspond to the abstract analysis of capitalism: capitalism's development progressively eliminating the remnants of pre-capitalist class

structures and producing an ever starker class polarisation. For Marx, history was set to converge with his theory.[13] For Wright, the central problem is not the survival of pre-capitalist classes, but the unanticipated emergence of bearers of alternative post-capitalist futures – of 'a whole terrain of class locations in capitalist *society* that are distinct from the polarised classes of the capitalist *mode of production*: expert managers, non-managerial experts, non-expert managers, etc.'.[14]

But, if this is so, then what is required is a modified theorisation of capitalist class structures that remains faithful to the central thrust of Marx's own analysis. Wright makes precisely this point in recognising a dual constraint upon any reconstructed Marxist theory of class.[15] Firstly, the production and development of the required concepts are to be constrained by the fundamental propositions of Marxist theory: auxiliary hypotheses are one thing, *ad hoc* hypotheses quite another. A recognisably Marxist analysis of the class structures of contemporary capitalism should retain the centrality of class relationships – as opposed to non-class relationships (gender, ethnicity, race, religion, etc.) – in major social transformations. Implicit, here, is another central strand of the Marxist theory: class is a *relational* concept and not merely a *comparative* one. It is because classes are defined by their interrelationships that they necessarily possess contradictory, and finally irreconcilable, interests, which precipitate them into conflict. A Marxist analysis cannot be a theory of class stratification: classes must discover each other in the world, not uncover each other through comparisons of wealth, status, tastes, speech codes, etc. Secondly, this abstract analysis must be consistent with the available empirical evidence. To decide by theoretical fiat that senior managers are really proletarians would be a betrayal of Marx's insistence upon the interpenetration of theory and practice. No map of capitalist class structures will have political purchase if it fails to correspond with the lived experience of definite historical actors. For Wright, abstract structures will converge with conjunctural maps because the two levels of analysis are to be mutually constraining: the concepts must cohere with the fundamental premisses of Marx's theory; but they must also have empirical reference to contemporary capitalism and practical relevance for contemporary socialist politics.

Wright's initial efforts to tackle this problem were heavily dependent upon the work of Althusser and Balibar.[16] What was required was 'a production-centred relational concept' of class which demonstrated that the objective basis for class antagonisms was inscribed within the structural contradictions that defined the capitalist mode of production. The objective basis of these antagonisms was identified in the

relations of exploitation: '[i]t is because the interests structured by exploitation are objective that we can describe the antagonisms between classes as intrinsic rather than contingent'.[17] The locus of these antagonisms was the sphere of production: the relations of control within the factory or the office. To begin with, then, we have the relations of exploitation between the owners of the means of production and the owners of labour-power; these relations contain the seeds of class antagonisms because they are lived as relations of domination within the sphere of production. It is not primarily because poor workers compare their positions with rich capitalists that they find themselves in fundamental opposition to capital. This opposition develops out of their quotidian experience of domination and control within the workplace.

Notice that the central issue is now the agent's control over her own and others' work-activity. But it is clear that these relations are not exhausted by some daily confrontation between an all-powerful capitalist and an impotent workforce. We can now identify what Wright designated as 'contradictory class locations': that is, the locations of individual 'place-holders' who are deprived of direct access to the means of production, and therefore compelled to sell their labour-power, but who are involved in the supervision of others once they have entered into the hidden sphere of production (foremen, managers, etc.); and also of those who may or may not have control over others, but who do have considerable control over their own work-activity (professionals, technicians, scientists, etc.). The holders of these contradictory locations will therefore tend to have contradictory interests which may pull them both ways at once: towards an identification of their interests with capital and an identification of their interests with those of labour. For example, lacking direct control over the means of production, the manager will also confront the prospect of unemployment during an economic downturn, or of being sacked if her performance is unsatisfactory; but she will also have an interest in preserving her autonomy in the workplace and of maintaining her control over the work-activity of others. The absence of the class polarisation anticipated by Marx is lived by its 'falsifiers' in the form of internally inconsistent interests: unable to identify fully with either shareholders or under-labourers, the holders of contradictory class positions develop their own troubled consciousnesses. One consequence of this is that these managers and experts are the potential bearers of alternative post-capitalist futures: in particular, a statist solution to recurrent capitalist crises would offer the managerial and technocratic classes the prospect of liberation from their 'oppressors'.[18]

Wright has recently conceded that this response was inadequate.[19] The appeal to degrees of control and autonomy within the workplace failed to respect either of the constraints that were to guide this reconstruction of the Marxist theory of class. Firstly, it failed to produce concepts that preserved the fundamental propositions of Marxist class theory, severing the crucial link between class locations and class interests. In what sense, for example, does the preservation of autonomy within the workplace give the bearers of these allegedly contradictory class locations interests that are distinct from those of the working class? Workers too will want to preserve and extend whatever autonomy they have. Moreover, if the central issue is now to be relations of domination, rather than control over the available means of production, then it is doubtful whether Marxist class theory can finally avoid collapsing into a multiple oppression approach. Domination is domination whether supported by class or ethnic or gender divisions.[20]

In the second place, this reconstructed theory of class locations failed to measure up to the empirical constraints. If the criterion assigning agents to class locations is to be the degree of control they possess over their own work-activity, then school janitors might do rather better than airline pilots, who cannot delay taking off until next week, or decide that it would make a pleasant change to go through take-off procedures in reverse order. One final point: these relations of control are partially dependent upon merely contingent factors: for example, the head scientist at a research establishment might be too easy-going to keep a vigilant eye upon his research assistants.[21]

In the light of these problems, Wright converted to Roemer.[22] Initially, Wright had attacked Roemer for failing to foreground relationships of control within the sphere of production, but he concedes in *Classes* that the essential foundation of the capital–labour relationship – including the relationships of control and subjection within the production process – is the capitalist's real economic control over alienable productive resources. The primary class interest of the capitalist class is the maintenance of its control over the alienable means of production: it is this control over the productive forces which enables it to dominate workers once they have entered the factory gates or the office doors. Classes, then, are to be defined exclusively in terms of the control they exercise over the use and disposal of productive resources: the relations of domination are dependent upon, and therefore subsidiary to, patterns of effective ownership and control. Whereas the domination-centred approach weakened the crucial relationship between class positions and structural locations – for example, by making the class positions of managers and technocrats dependent, not upon their

effective ownership of productive resources, but rather upon their power and autonomy within the workplace – this exploitation-centred approach restores the relationship to the available productive forces to the very heart of Marxist class analysis. A Roemerian approach to the conceptualisation of contemporary class structures was therefore consistent with a materialist analysis of the processes of class formation and struggle. Roemer's most important contribution had been to provide the conceptual foundations for a theory of 'contradictory class locations' focused upon relations of control over productive assets. What was of primary importance about managers and technocrats was not that they got to boss people around more than they got bossed around: these power relations were derived from their control over 'material' productive forces: that is, over skills assets and organisational assets. Roemer's theory of class and exploitation had largely succeeded in its declared intention of providing a Marxian conception of the possible forms of post-capitalist exploitation.

A Roemerian theory of capitalist class structures is to be preferred to all the available alternatives because it is 'more coherent than its rivals, meshes better with the overall theory of which it is a part and provides greater explanatory leverage in empirical investigations'.[23] This might be doubted in the light of objections to Roemer's theory of exploitation and class developed in the last chapter. However, many of these criticisms cannot be applied without qualification to Wright's version of this theory: both because Wright, a practising sociologist, has implicitly discarded some important strands of Roemer's argument; and because he has explicitly proposed significant modifications of the original theory. Regarding the former, Wright does not suggest that withdrawal games could gain any explanatory purchase through some kind of direct alliance with a reconstructed historical materialism. For him these 'games' are no more than a useful methodological tool for the elaboration and development of a set of concepts to be deployed in the analysis of actual class structures, and are to be assessed on the basis of their power to illuminate historically given patterns of class action and interaction. Indeed, what Wright has really taken over from Roemer could be written on two sides of A4: essentially, it is no more than that relations of exploitation depend upon the control exercised over the available productive resources, where the relevant resources are extended to include not only ('brute') labour-power and alienable means of production, but also skills and organisational assets. But Wright also maintains that a Roemerian theory of contemporary class structures is desirable because it offers not merely a moral-utopian *critique* of capitalism, but also the foundations for a critical *theory* of

capitalism encompassing the material interests of rival classes and illuminating the processes of class formation.[24]

But what then of Roemer's own admission that his theory of exploitation finally collapsed into a normative theory of justice? From a Marxist perspective this clearly indicates a form of moral-utopianism, at least so long as moral advocacy is not expressly allied to some theory identifying the potential class agents of prospective social transformations. Here Wright's response has been to distance himself from Roemer. He draws a distinction between economic exploitation and economic oppression: a resource-poor agent might conceivably exploit a resource-rich one, but while there is technical exploitation here, there is no economic oppression.[25] Roemer's original withdrawal rules required real transfers of labour from the exploited class to its exploiters: '[t]he critical addition is the idea that in the case of exploitation, the welfare of the exploiting class depends upon the work of the exploited class'.[26] But isn't this true in the case of Adam and Karl? Perhaps we should answer that there is not the required asymmetry here: one could equally well say that the enhanced welfare of exploited Adam depended upon the non-work of exploiter Karl. What is crucial for Wright is to develop a concept of exploitation possessed of genuine explanatory purchase and therefore excluding that merely technical exploitation which involves no irreconcilable contradictions between the material interests of rival classes and no direct transfers from exploited to exploiters within the sphere of production.

This approach to the class analysis of contemporary capitalism therefore meets the first of the two constraints proposed by Wright: it conforms to the fundamental assumptions of Marx's theory of capitalist class structures more successfully than any of its rivals – in particular, it is a more convincing and coherent development of the original theory than the domination-centred approach. But Wright is also concerned with a criterion of assessment absent from Roemer's initial elaboration of the theory: the explanatory leverage of this theory for the empirical investigation of actually existing capitalisms. The preferred theory of contemporary class structures should be the one best supported by the empirical evidence: that is, best supported 'with respect to whatever it is that class is meant to explain'.[27] Wright selects two criteria for adjudication – income and class attitudes – and attempts a confirmation of his approach through an empirical investigation of the class structures of two significantly different contemporary capitalist societies: Sweden and the United States. Broadly speaking, his conclusion is that this investigation provides further support for a Roemerian theorisation of contemporary class structures. As one moves up a

complex twelve-stage class structure – designed to capture relations of exploitation along all three of the relevant dimensions (assets in means of production, 'organisational assets' and skills) – both incomes and class attitudes respond monotonically in the anticipated manner.[28] Unskilled proletarians earn less than uncredentialled supervisors, who earn less than expert supervisors, who earn less than bourgeois owners of the means of production. The results are much the same when one considers responses to propositions such as '[s]triking workers are generally justified in physically preventing strike-breakers from entering the place of work'.[29] Expert managers are less likely to assent to this proposition than semi-credentialled supervisors or expert non-managers. Wright therefore concludes that 'the data are systematically consistent with the proposed reconceptualisation of class in terms of relations of exploitation. Both in terms of the relationship between class and income and the analysis of the relationship between class and consciousness, the basically monotonic relationship between both results add credibility to the concept.'[30] Roemer's theory of exploitation and class, suitably modified, is therefore the best available basis for the theorisation of the class structures of contemporary capitalism.

Wright has developed Roemer's theory of class and exploitation in a direction that avoids some of our earlier objections. But if the basic thrust of these criticisms was more or less sound, then we should expect them to apply in some measure to Wright's own analysis of contemporary class structures. Wright not only bases his analysis on Roemer's reconstruction of Marx's theory of exploitation, but has also followed Roemer in rejecting both the labour theory of value and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Certainly, such a reconstruction was bound to involve a considerable diminution of Marxism's theoretical pretensions with highly significant implications for both Marxist theory and socialist practice. Let us briefly consider these problems with reference to the two criteria which, so Wright argues, should constrain any attempted reconstruction of Marx's theory of capitalism: (i) fidelity to the fundamental theoretical propositions of Marxism; and (ii) consistency with the empirical evidence.

Among the most important of these theoretical constraints is the centrality of class struggle for explanations of social and historical development, and the need for some account of the process of class formation within capitalism: in particular, the development of proletarian class consciousness. Neither Roemer's theory of exploitation nor Wright's empirical investigations are sufficient to demonstrate the primacy of class conflict for social and historical explanation. We

noticed above that Roemer's withdrawal rules might be appealed to in support of non-class critiques and withdrawals. Wright concedes precisely this point: acknowledging, for example, that the theory might warrant the claim that churches 'exploit' believers as a consequence of their control over 'the 'means of salvation'.[31] Nor does the empirical evidence serve to arbitrate on this question. While Wright is careful to control for gender, nationality, religion, etc. in his work on class, this does not rule out the possibility that the statistically significant correlations would prove to be far greater if similar studies were made of the welfare and attitudes of men and women, blacks and whites, Protestants and Catholics. Indeed, contemporary history would suggest that if people do continue to identify with social classes, this is often of marginal importance in comparison with gender, national or religious identifications. Given the development and intensification of non-class identifications and struggles, we might feel tempted to conclude, with Elster, that 'the centrality of class in social conflict cannot be upheld'.[32] (Alternatively, it would be necessary to demonstrate what Marxists often assert: that class theory will be essential for explaining those conflicts based upon non-class identifications.)

Wright's reworking of Roemer's theory of class and exploitation provides him with no clear response to this objection. He therefore appeals to two supplementary arguments: (i) that class struggle explains *epochal* social transformations: whatever the *conjunctural* significance of other forms of conflict, it is class conflict that determines the central *trajectories* of historical development;[33] and (ii) that class relations are fundamental because '[p]roperty relations not only determine mechanisms by which surplus is appropriated: they simultaneously determine mechanisms by which the exploited gain access to subsistence, to their means of existence'.[34] But both these responses border upon an identical kind of circularity. This is most evident with (i). Imagine that some religious movement achieved a dramatic transformation of some society through a protracted political struggle which successfully mobilised huge masses. Imagine, for example, that this 'revolution' dramatically restructured social, cultural and ideological structures, but left the economy essentially unchanged: changes might include drastic curtailment of the status and autonomy of women; stringent legal sanctions against blasphemy; prohibition of alcohol; and dismantling of all health care provision. Let us say that, according to the beliefs of this religion, these changes are sufficient to bring pre-history to a close and initiate the establishment of the earthly kingdom of God. Is this an *epochal* social transformation? From the perspective of this religious sect, it is; from a Marxist perspective, it is

not. The concept of an epochal social transformation is itself a theory-dependent one: it cannot therefore be a basis for arbitration between rival theories. Marx's special theory of capitalism sought to provide independent support for the claim that a process of class formation and class struggle would tend to bring about the transformation identified by his general theory: the transition from capitalism to socialism. Class divisions would in fact be the basis for the most fundamental conflicts within advanced capitalist societies. This is very different from accepting that they are possibly not, and then concluding that alternative sources of conflict are not really important because one is committed to a general theory that says that they are not 'epochal'. Presumably, Wright means to argue that there will eventually be such a transformation and that it will actually be of 'epochal' significance: but he provides little argument in support of this claim.

A similar difficulty arises with (ii). Why should it follow from the fact that production relations are implicated in securing the subsistence needs of the exploited, that class conflict will come to have explanatory priority over all other sources of conflict? Where capitalism is providing this 'subsistence' to a majority – even where it isn't – alternative identifications may still, and often do, assume considerably more salience than class-based ones.

This brings us to the second theoretical constraint: that the reconstructed theory should provide a basis for some plausible account of the process of class formation and struggle within capitalism. Marx's special theory of capitalism sought to show that a successful transition to socialism became increasingly likely as capitalism developed, for three related reasons: (i) capitalist development provided the *material* preconditions for the successful creation of a socialist society – 'abundance'; (ii) it produced the *social* preconditions – an increasingly class-conscious and organised proletariat; and (iii) it exposed the fundamental contradictions inscribed within the capitalist mode of production as capitalism plunged into ever-deeper *economic* crises. The increasing viability of socialism was therefore broadly coincident with the emergence and radicalisation of the class agents of a socialist transformation.

On Wright's version of 'weak' historical materialism, the transition to socialism becomes increasingly probable only in the first of these three senses:

> The basic argument is that the probability of successfully accomplishing these transitions monotonically increases with the level of development of social productivity. It takes a higher level of productivity to successfully

> socialize the means of production than to equalize ownership in labor power assets; it takes an even higher level successfully to democratize (equalize) control over organization assets, and a still higher level to successfully equalize control over skill assets.[35]

But, in this case, what is the relationship between Wright's general theory of history and his own theory of capitalism? Will workers or managers be increasingly likely to pursue non-capitalist futures as capitalism progresses? Given his abandonment of Marx's special theory of capitalism, what does Wright believe would serve to convince the bearers of these alternatives to exit from, rather than to improve upon, capitalism? Wright acknowledges that actual historical trajectories will be determined by a whole range of historical contingencies; and emphasises that the mere possibility of an epochal social transition does not dictate its occurrence. Indeed, he allows that production in the advanced capitalist societies may now be well in excess of the requisite level for a successful transition to socialism. But Wright has provided no good reasons for believing that it is any more probable that social transitions will actually occur – or, at least, be attempted – once capitalism produces the material preconditions for the transition to socialism. There may be evidence that proletarians (and other non-capitalist classes) are class-conscious, yet Wright has nothing to say about the *development* of class consciousness: the current class attitudes of proletarians, experts and managers might be either the faint reverberations of a radicalised past, or the early presentiments of a re-radicalised future. If advanced capitalism is able to deliver a historically determined subsistence – televisions, holidays, VCRs, etc. – to the majority of its 'oppressed', and indefinitely to postpone its final crisis, then what reasons are there for anticipating future social transformations?

There is also something curious about the empirical evidence that Wright offers in support of his theory of class. Having insisted that a recognisably Marxist theory of the class structure of contemporary capitalisms must define classes in terms of their relations to each other, and to the available productive forces, he proceeds to defend the theory through a comparative study of incomes and social attitudes. But it will come as little surprise to class stratificationists, be they never so hostile to Marxist class analysis, that the big bourgeoisie tend to earn more than expert managers, who earn more than highly qualified professionals, who earn more than shopkeepers, who earn more than unskilled labourers. Nor need the most ardent apologist for capitalism be the least embarrassed to discover that less highly skilled workers

tend to be more sympathetic to union closed shops; or that independent professionals and technicians are generally more sympathetic to trade unionism than the managers of large companies. What is at issue here is *why* all this is so. For example, capitalism's defenders can argue that it is both necessary and proper that income should be distributed in this way: talent and effort receive their due rewards; and a structure of incentives is provided that increases levels of productivity to the benefit of all. Moreover, the commitment of less skilled workers to trade unions might be attributed to a misapprehension of their true interests created by agitators. Wage increases cut into profits: falling profits mean declining investment levels; lack of investment means future job or wage cuts; or both. Marxists would expect to discover such correlations between exploitation status, incomes and attitudes, but their opponents need not be unduly disconcerted by these results: the fundamental issue is why capitalism is perceived in these ways; and how it *works*, regardless of how it is perceived.

These points can be bought out through a consideration of Wright's own discussion of the ideological supports which sanction and sustain capitalist relations of production.[36] Crucial here are considerations of welfare: for example, workers may be convinced that their own long-term welfare depends upon the continuing profitability of the companies that employ them; and therefore that it is in their own real interests to submit to the relations of exploitation, and even to contribute to the intensification of the rate of exploitation by modifying their wage demands. Similarly, they may consider that it is in their real interests that they should earn less money than the technicians working on product innovation and the supervisors who directly organise their work-activity. If this were not so, then no-one would want to work for credentials or undertake supervisorial responsibilities: firms would consequently be less profitable, wages would fall, and unemployment would rise. Such beliefs have a real material basis: 'capitalist exploitation is . . . the necessary *incentive* for investment *given the existence of capitalist property relations*. If those property relations are viewed as unchangeable or natural, then such welfare arguments . . . become quite compelling.'[37]

Now, the idea here is not that anyone believes that there is literally *no* alternative to capitalism, but rather that they believe that there is no *viable* alternative. 'There is no alternative' roughly translates as 'this is as good as it gets'. But Marxists argue that capitalism has a 'historical mission' to fulfil and can therefore concede that 'there is no alternative', so long as levels of production are inadequate to underwrite the transition to socialism: premature transition is not a viable alternative. For

this reason the development of the material preconditions for socialism removes a significant obstacle to epochal social transformation: the welfare arguments are no longer compelling. But Wright cannot take this line. In the first place, he acknowledges the huge costs and risks of attempting such a transformation: of attempting the overthrow of a property system possessed of formidable coercive and ideological resources. Secondly, he has also conceded that there is no guarantee that there is any viable alternative to the incentive structure of capitalist property relations. A socialist economy would require a complete transformation of motivational structures, but experimentation with alternative incentive structures could only commence after the revolution.[38] The 'alternative to capitalism' is therefore a protracted and costly struggle in pursuit of an uncertain prize. Whether such an option might possibly be taken will largely depend on the failures of capitalism. If capitalism really produced a huge mass of workers with nothing to lose but their chains, then it might be reasonable to suppose that they would be prepared to endure the costs and uncertainties of a revolutionary struggle against it. Wright argues that capitalism does not do so. But even were this the case, then it would be necessary to demonstrate that there was no better alternative within capitalism: 'actually existing' capitalisms can be as readily disowned by capitalism's apologists as 'actually existing' socialisms have been by Marxists. Marx's special theory of capitalism sought to demonstrate that a class would emerge with a more or less transparent motive for the fight against capitalism. But he was also preoccupied with demonstrating what was far from transparent: that capitalism's internal dynamics inexorably drove it into recurrent and intensifying economic crises. Capitalism's failures were finally irredeemable.

Two Cheers for Social Democracy

One central exponent of Rational Choice Marxism, Przeworski, has squared up to these problems, and has been rather more clear-sighted about the consequences of this full-scale abandonment of Marx's economic theory for contemporary socialist projects, and therefore about the serious inadequacies of the Roemerian reconstruction of the general theory of class and exploitation. Przeworski has argued that Roemer failed to consider the possibilities for reforming capitalism. Workers have never been faced with the stark choice between the endurance of actually existing capitalism and wandering off into the post-capitalist sunset: they have also been able 'to alter their lot under capitalism'.[39]

The majority of workers' organisations have not fought for socialism but for better wages, shorter hours, health and safety provisions, etc. Moreover, the individual worker may seek to improve her lot by gaining entry into the privileged coalition S1: that is, by gaining access to the petty bourgeoisie, acquiring scarce skills, or rising up the managerial hierarchy. The crucial issue is therefore the identification of the necessary conditions under which workers might reasonably be expected to launch a struggle for *socialism*, and not simply a defensive struggle to improve their conditions within *capitalism*. Both Roemer and Wright tended to assume that capitalism was a 'zero-sum game', and made little real effort to develop any argument in support of the superior economic efficiency of socialism. Rational workers, argues Przeworski, will prefer socialism only if they are convinced that it is a more efficient system for the satisfaction of their needs and will bring about an immediate and continual improvement in their material conditions.

Przeworski is equally brutal concerning the consequences for Analytical Marxism of the wholesale abandonment of Marx's special theory of capitalism. According to it, capitalist accumulation could not proceed either smoothly or indefinitely. This would, at the very least, place considerable strains upon any compromise between labour and capital, whereby workers consented to their exploitation in return for acceptable wage levels, combined with sufficient investment to secure future increases in productivity. If Marx had been right about the developmental logic of capitalism, then its development would have convinced regarding the inefficiency of capitalism; an appreciation of Marx's special theory would have convinced regarding the limitations of reformist strategies. Przeworski – in common with Roemer, Wright, Cohen, Elster *et al.* – rejects this theory of capitalism. The internal dynamics of capitalism will not inexorably lead to a declining rate of profit; nor will wages be driven down to subsistence level. Bluntly, wage increases in excess of any historically determined subsistence have been extracted throughout the history of advanced capitalism by the struggles of workers' organisations: it has been 'unrealistic' wage demands that have posed the main threat to profitability, and therefore to accumulation. However, the evidence suggests that consent can be reproduced at wage levels that do not threaten to undermine capital accumulation: 'distributional conflicts do not necessarily lead to a falling rate of profit, even when wages are sufficient for legitimation. A capitalist system, in which consent is at all times reproduced and in which accumulation proceeds smoothly is conceivable from the distributional point of view.'[40] So long as they are committed to capitalism,

the best strategy for rational wage-earners is neither to be very militant – excessive wage demands will undermine profits and plunge the system into crisis; nor to be not at all militant – any gains from this strategy will be postponed into a very long term in which they will all be dead; but to be 'moderately militant'. Their optimal strategy is to push for the best wages they can get without threatening crisis.[41] Przeworski opts for a strategy that is as risk-free as anyone could wish: '[u]nless the capacity to institute socialism is organised economically, politically and ideologically within the capitalist society, wage-earners are better off avoiding crises and cooperating in the reproduction of capitalist accumulation'.[42] Given the obstacles to socialism that he identifies, this is more or less tantamount to 'no socialism' – at least, for the foreseeable future. Not for nothing does Przeworski finally declare himself 'a follower not of Vladimir Ilyich but of that other great Russian socialist thinker, Goergij Konstantinowich Pessim'.[43]

Przeworski's central preoccupation has been a reappraisal of the history of the European social-democratic parties. This project is indicated both by his emphasis upon those strategies by which the working-class movement can improve its lot within capitalism, and because some form of gradualism might appear best adapted to do the preparatory work required to secure the economic, political, and ideological conditions for a long-postponed transition to socialism. In fact Przeworski is not optimistic about the prospects of exiting capitalism via the ballot-box. The optimism of an earlier generation of reformists had been reliant upon the assumption that the internal dynamics of capitalism would produce a huge majority for socialism. At the turn of the century, being a socialist of this particular persuasion was hardly an exacting business. Wherever liberal capitalism was conjoined with representative democracy, the deliverance of socialism required only a briefish period of gestation: capitalism would oblige the Second International not only by producing its own gravediggers (i.e., the proletariat), but also by provisioning them with shovels (i.e., ballot-papers). But the proletariat in Western Europe remained a minority. Capitalism proved sufficiently fecund to produce a whole brood of unanticipated offspring: managers, technicians, professionals and other holders of contradictory class locations. Social-democratic parties couldn't win elections by appealing to the class interests of industrial workers, so they sought to broaden their electoral appeal by becoming 'people's parties'. Rude awakening followed rude awakening: '[a]s a pure party of workers they cannot win the mandate for socialism, but as the party of the entire nation they have not won it

either'.[44] Stuck upon the horns of this dilemma, social democrats 'behave[d] the way rational people do when confronted with a dilemma: they bemoan and regret, change their strategies, and once again bemoan and regret'.[45] Social democracy produced lamentation rather than socialism, but Przeworski's final comments upon its history and achievements are the more or less fraternal greetings of a fellow pessimist: 'I think that social democrats have done about as well as they could have under historical circumstances not of their choosing and I am quite sympathetic to their unenviable predicaments'.[46]

In appraising the history of social democracy, Przeworski adopts a rational choice approach: '[s]ocial relations are . . . treated as structures of choices available to the historical actors, individual and collective, at each moment of history, and in turn as the outcomes of strategies adopted earlier by some political forces. Behaviour is thus analysed as strategic action, oriented towards goals, based on deliberations, responding to alternatives, resulting from decisions.'[47] Socialists have had to choose their optimal strategies in definite historical conjunctures; these choices have helped to determine the contours of subsequent historical conjunctures. In the 'real world' electoral abstention was not a feasible option for working-class parties. It would have been unthinkable to eschew participation in those representative institutions which offered opportunities for securing immediate gains for their working-class constituencies: '[r]evolutionary ideals may move history, but they neither nourish nor shelter'.[48] Socialist firebrands had little option but to assume the guise of bourgeois parliamentarians. Yet, so long as they remained the parliamentary vanguard of the organised working class, such participation could hardly be viewed as betrayal. The best strategy was electoral participation; the prime objective was electoral success. But Comrade History was soon to set them down upon the horns of that other dilemma. The proletariat failed to become a majority. In an effort to secure power, social democrats therefore sought to build electoral coalitions by attempting to draw support from outside the working class. This strategy failed because the dilemma was a vicious one: by diluting their class character, social-democratic parties lost the support of the working class just as they gained it from sections of the middle class. Seeking electoral majorities, they succeeded only in reconstituting their electoral minorities. Optimal strategies were hardly transparent here: '[a]t some time, when a large proportion of workers and allies vote socialist, the mobilisation of additional allies may result in a fall of support among workers. This will happen at the moment when the party's efforts to recruit new workers are exactly offset by the effect of the middle-class strategy on

them.'[49] Socialism could no longer get along without graphs and Shadow Communications Agencies.

But why should the enticement of dentists, retail managers, lab technicians, etc., actually lead to a loss of working class support? Not primarily because an appeal to the middle classes will necessarily be detrimental to the current interests of the working class, but because it will tend to obliterate the very basis of this formulation: class identification. Social-democratic parties do not promote themselves as the representatives of all classes, but as the representatives of none: they become People's Parties. Class interests are now 'special interests', menacing a 'community', represented by responsible parliamentary parties dedicated to the selfless and rational pursuit of the common good. But classes are formed, not found, as political agents: to embrace the mythology of the classless society is not to submit to the ruthless logic of some 'real world' in which socialism is not possible, but to participate in the *construction* of a world in which socialism is not possible. As the category of class fades from political discourse, it disappears from the self-identifications of the historical bearers of class locations. Class agents must be teased out of class structures in order to be assembled as potent social and political forces: 'economic, political and ideological conditions jointly structure the realm of struggles that have as their effect the organisation, disorganisation or reorganisation of classes. Classes must thus be viewed as effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political and ideological.'[50] As workers were transformed into voters, they became susceptible to the allurements of other parties. Addressed as rational and self-interested instrumentalists, they were tempted by council house ownership or share offers; addressed as 'citizens', they often became hostile to the 'sectionalism' of their own trade unions; addressed as Catholics, Southerners or Francophiles, they allied with 'special interest groups' according to their religion, culture or ethnicity. Class agency went away provided no-one talked about it. Of course, these 'individuals' continued to occupy class locations within definite relations of production, the logics and structures of which could not be undone by discursive transfigurations. But these '[s]ocial cleavages . . . are never given directly to our consciousness. Social differences acquire the status of cleavages as an outcome of ideological and political struggles.'[51] Class bites only when it is bidden.

But if, in one sense, this 'general interest' is a discursive fiction, then what sectional interests lurk behind its façades? The interests of capitalists. By opting for the dilution of their class character, social-democratic parties endorsed a discourse of universalism that not only

lost them support among the working class, but played right into the hands of capital:

> Under capitalism, capitalists naturally appear to be the bearers of future universal interests while the interests of all other groups appear as inimical to future development and hence particularistic. Universalism is the natural ideology of the bourgeoisie since, as long as people living in the same society are thought to have some 'general', 'common' or 'public' economic interests, capitalists as a class represent these interests.[52]

For example, moderation of wage demands is both in the 'common interest' and in the interests of capital: indeed, it is in the 'common interest' precisely because it is in the interests of capital. If social-democratic parties are either unable or unwilling to fight for socialism, then, should they find themselves custodians of the general good, they have no option other than the competent management of capitalism:

> Any government in a capitalist society is dependent on capital. The nature of the political forces which come to office does not effect this dependence, for it is structural: a characteristic of the system and not of occupants of governmental positions, the winners of elections. Being 'in power' gives little power: social democrats are subject to the same structural dependence as any other party.[53]

To summarise: socialist parties had little choice but to enter the electoral arena; once in, they had little choice but to dilute their class character; on gaining power, they could do (virtually) nothing with it. For all this, they have 'done as well as they could': they could do nothing and they did it rather well.

But there is a deeper problem here. Przeworski further implies that social-democratic parties should continue more or less indefinitely on this same course. He argues that it is wrong to condemn social democracy for failing to deliver the impossible (socialism), and that we should acknowledge that it has made the best it could of a bad job – ameliorating the worst excesses of capitalism to whatever degree was deemed to be compatible with electoral survival. But if invocations of the 'national interest' are part of the cause of the current dilemmas of social democracy – a historical circumstance of their choosing – then wouldn't socialists be better advised to rediscover their class character? To offer an alternative vision of the structures and logics of advanced capitalisms, rather than reinforcing an ideology favourable to capital? Crudely, this would be a viable strategy only if Marx had

been mostly right about capitalism. But Przeworski argues that Marx was mostly wrong.

Take the 'myth' of the general interest. According to Marxism's founders, this was only a mythology in so far as particular classes were represented as the eternal and natural bearers of some universal good: the interests of capital really were coincident with the interests of mankind during that period in which capitalism fulfilled its 'historical mission'. Socialists could do little more than wage economic struggles for improved wages and conditions until the material, social and political preconditions for the transition to socialism had matured within the womb of capitalism itself. So far there is broad agreement between Przeworski and Marx. But Marx provided a theory of capitalism demonstrating that it was foredoomed to turn into a fetter upon the development and use of the productive forces: the severance of the (anti-capitalist) 'general interest' from the interests of capitalists was inscribed within the very logic of capitalism. Moreover, this development created the material and political conditions for a viable transition to an efficient socialist economy. For Przeworski, there are no systemic reasons why capitalism should ever stop working, and no good reasons for believing that socialism would be any more efficient. Capitalism may remain in everyone's material interests. But Przeworski does argue that its abolition finally may be 'a necessity not because such are the laws of history or because socialism is superior in any way, neither for reasons of Newton or Kant, but only because capitalism prevents us from becoming whatever we might become when we are free'.[54] The proletariat retains no privileged theoretical or political status. Indeed, under these conditions only reformism finally gains from any reassertion of class-identification. Having reconstituted workers as a class, socialists could offer them little more than programmes of amelioration within capitalism, and guidance in the theory and practice of 'moderate militancy'. Having exposed the ideology that sustained capitalism, they would have to insist upon its real material basis.

The crucial point here is not whether Przeworski is correct in this pessimistic assessment of the prospects for socialism, but to recognise that this work does confront the real consequences of Rational Choice Marxism's rejection of Marx's theory of class and exploitation. Its adherents have not offered a reconstruction of Marx's economic theory; they have simply attempted to get along without an economic theory. While Roemer and Wright offer no reasons for believing that socialism could ever be a more efficient system than capitalism, Przeworski bluntly admits that this reconstructed Marxism *cannot* offer any reasons for preferring socialism. Rational choosers are

unlikely to choose socialism; nor is there any good reason why they should. Marxism must somehow get along without the proletariat, without a theory of capitalism, and without any clear idea of the incentive structures required for an economically efficient socialism. It must survive on a diet of possibility-frontiers, statistically significant correlations between class locations and empirical data, theories of justice, and invocations of the realm of freedom.

From Analytical Marxism to Ethical Socialism?

The analytical 'reconstruction' of Marxism has spectacularly deflated its 'theoretical pretensions'. Historical materialism is now (at best) a 'weak' theory of historical possibilities; the special theory of capitalism has been altogether discarded. Cohen, having admitted to profound doubts regarding the truth of orthodox historical materialism, proceeds to caution us against exaggerating the political significance of the indicated theoretical decampment: '[a]n appreciation of the principal evils of capitalism . . . does not depend on an ambitious thesis about the whole of human history'.[55] Similarly, concluding their own reconstruction of Marx's theory of history, Wright, Levine and Sober concede that '"weak historical materialism", joined with the political convictions all Marxists share, makes the normative defence of Marxist political objectives unavoidable'.[56]

However, it might be that the Analytical Marxists have more or less abandoned the narrative of technological progress, in favour of the narrative of class struggle. But here too normative considerations have elbowed their way to the centre of the stage. As our analysis of Przeworski's work on Social Democracy confirms, the paradigm's exponents have been less than sanguine regarding the prospects for any future struggle for socialism motivated by the *material interests* of the working class. Having abandoned Marx's special theory of capitalism, they cannot claim (but sometimes do) that capitalism is foredoomed to plunge into ever-deeper economic crises; recognising the 'dubiousness' of capitalism's failure, they have conceded that workers now have a good deal more to lose than their chains; lamenting socialism's 'chequered' history, they have also been forced to address the question of what – if anything – the working class (or anyone else) would actually gain from the transition to socialism; and they have anyway admitted that the immediate protagonists of such a transition would risk ending up with seriously diminished short-term material prospects at best, and with a bullet in the head at worst.

The material interests of the working class (at least in the advanced capitalist countries) hardly dictate a struggle for socialism. Fight for socialism, the argument goes. Capitalism is good at producing those things that you (currently, though mistakenly) wish to consume, and its tendency to produce economic crises is – for all we know – a remediable one. On the other hand, socialism may prove to be (in some sense) more efficient (we are still working on the blueprints), although, to be honest, you are unlikely to experience any of the (uncertain) benefits and could well end up dead, imprisoned or materially worse off.

Hardly a clarion call. Much better, perhaps, for socialists to substitute moral exhortations for appeals to the material interests of any social class. The energies of the leading protagonists of Analytical Marxism have therefore been directed increasingly towards exposure of the 'evils of capitalism' and the construction of normative foundations for (market) socialism. Following upon the wholesale abandonment of the explanatory programme bequeathed by Marxism's founders, these excursions into mainstream political philosophy have been characterised by an embrace of liberal theories of justice. It is impossible here to examine all the work within moral philosophy that has been produced by the Analytical Marxists in recent years, but the general trend away from Marxism and towards left-liberalism can be illustrated with particular attention to the development of Roemer's work on justice.

Those writers who have argued that Marx did condemn capitalism as unjust – including the Analytical Marxists – have laid a particular emphasis upon Marx's distinction between the appearance and essence of capitalist relations of production.[57] In the 'sphere of circulation', equivalent exchanges for equivalent – the worker is paid the full value in exchange for what she sells (her labour-power); but in the 'sphere of production', the worker is exploited – the use of her labour-power (the performance of labour) creates surplus-value which is appropriated by the capitalist without return. This is unjust, it is argued, because the worker does not receive back in wages the full value of her contribution: a proportion of her working day is spent toiling to produce surplus-value for the capitalist. How does this come about? Because, argues Roemer, deprived of direct access to the means of production, and owning only her own labour-power, the worker's best – perhaps, only – option is to sell it to some capitalist. Capitalist exploitation is, then, the predictable consequence of the rational choices of utility-maximising agents, acting within social structures defined by an inegalitarian distribution of the means of production.

Is exploitation unjust? That, so it is suggested, all depends upon the

justice of the inegalitarian distribution of alienable assets which produces and sustains it: '[a]ttitudes towards private property are at the heart of the matter: but these attitudes depend on even more fundamental viewpoints, such as those about the rights of individuals to benefit from the skills and traits they have been born with or acquired'.[58] If capitalists have a just entitlement to their property, then there is no injustice in their profiting from the use of those assets: 'If it is morally all right that capitalists do and workers do not own the means of production, then capitalist profit is not the fruit of exploitation; and if the pre-contractual distributive position is morally wrong, then the case for exploitation is made.'[59] Marxists must show that this distributive position is not all right.

Is the capitalist distribution of alienable assets unjust? Consider the immanent critique of actually existing capitalism that Marx developed in his famous discussion of primitive accumulation. European capitalism did not come about because individuals with commendable time preferences abstained from consumption, and saved up capital – later to be heroically risked on enterprises that contributed to the common wealth. It came about through a process of robbery and plunder, that is, through the violation of pre-capitalist property rights. However, precisely because this critique is an immanent one, it is also inconclusive. Marxists must add that capitalism would be unjust *even* if its historical origins were 'just' ones. The Analytical Marxists have therefore turned their attention to the range of arguments advanced to justify capitalists' monopoly over the alienable means of production. Would the inegalitarian distribution of alienable assets be justified if capitalists really were the abstinent, entrepreneurial and risk-taking heroes of their own mythologies?

Entrepreneurs have bright ideas, establish businesses, and make them successful; they create wealth and provision those lacking such gifts with employment prospects: '[p]eople with this [entrepreneurial] ability see ways of organising labour and producing commodities that others do not see, and this scarce factor is rewarded with profits'.[60] But, responds Roemer, no-one deserves to be rewarded for the exercise of talents which they have done nothing to earn: if entrepreneurial talent is a product of some combination of (favourable) genetic endowment and (privileged) social environment, then possessing this talent is plain good fortune. (Talents of this kind have moral significance only where they have been acquired in morally significant ways – that is, where they have been earned in some sense.) One of the things that entrepreneurs pride themselves upon, of course, is their heroic determination to shoulder our common risks: '[t]he worker is guaranteed his

steady wage and sleeps well at night, paying the capitalist to gamble for him'.[61] Roemer argues that most factory workers would leap at the opportunity to abandon the production line for the investment casino (particularly in view of the hugely generous house rules). What finance capitalist would exchange the Calvary of common risk for a career of grinding labour under the shadow of unemployment? And then there are those commendable time-preferences: capitalists saved while the feckless spent: abstainers deserve the rewards for abstention. Once again, this will all depend on how these preferences were initially acquired. If the preferences themselves are not deserved, then the inequalities that they produce are undeserved – hence, unjust. The key issue therefore concerns the moral significance of those processes through which talents and traits are initially acquired.

Let us now summarise and discuss these arguments, with particular reference to Roemer's withdrawal games, and the prospects for the transition from capitalism to socialism. There are the historical injustices of European capitalism's origins. However, these injustices do not argue in favour of the transition from capitalism to socialism. In theory, they could be remedied, in Nozickian fashion, through an initial redistribution of assets governed by the 'historical-entitlement principle of justice', followed by the reinitiation of ('clean') capitalist relations. Inequalities in the distribution of productive assets would swiftly re-emerge. Perhaps those who ended up in possession of the means of production under these initial conditions would be getting no more than their just deserts. How, then, are Marxists to justify the claim that justice requires 'equality in the distribution of productive assets'? By demonstrating that those agents possessing the relevant talents and dispositions have done nothing to deserve them, and therefore nothing to deserve the advantages that flow from them.

Leaving aside the sheer intractability of the arguments here, notice three things. Firstly, it might be pointed out that leftish conceptions of justice typically embrace a good deal more than considerations of desert. Even if unequal rewards to scarce talents were justified, this would not justify inequalities that neglected (for example) the basic needs of the worst-off. But there is nothing distinctively Marxian about this kind of argument, which is entirely consistent with the abandonment of the struggle for socialism in favour of the pursuit of a fairer capitalism. Secondly, even if it were demonstrated that scarce talents and traits lack moral significance, this would not be sufficient for the condemnation of capitalism, because these injustices might be justified on grounds of efficiency. Finally, these arguments would not obviously support the case for socialism *on grounds of justice*: the contribution

principle ('from each according to his contribution'), prescribed by Marx for the 'lower stage' of communism, also rewards scarce talents and personality traits: that is, it respects 'self-ownership'. But if talents are unearned, then these rewards would be unjust for precisely the same reasons that rewards to capitalist entrepreneurs were unjust.

These points can be illuminated through a comparison with the work of John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls's argument is developed through a (hypothetical) contractarianism. Rational agents are to choose principles of justice – including principles of distributive justice – from within an 'original position'. They are to reason like good Kantians, not bargain like good bourgeois: they are therefore kept ignorant of everything that might prejudice their deliberations in the direction of self-interest. One thing they are forbidden to know is who they will be once they emerge from behind the 'veil of ignorance': they are ignorant of their own skills, talents and personality traits. Rawls assumes, then, precisely what Roemer claims that Marxists are bound to argue: the moral insignificance of entrepreneurial talents and personal abstemiousness. But Rawls's principle is not an egalitarian principle. Rational individuals choosing principles to govern basic social institutions, and ignorant of their location within that society, will be particularly concerned with their prospects should they emerge to discover that they belong to the 'worst-off' group in society. Rational individuals in the 'original position' therefore adopt the 'maximin' rule, agreeing to those principles that ensure the best possible outcome for the least-advantaged group.[62] Distributive justice is to be governed by the 'difference principle': social and economic advantages are to be arranged so that they are 'to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged'.[63]

Roemer likewise develops his theory of justice through an examination of the hypothetical choices, of (and within) basic economic and social structures, that would be made by rational individuals: in particular, by members of exploited coalitions.[64] And, like Rawls, he assumes that those capitalists currently rewarded for their talents and traits have done nothing to merit those rewards. This all points in the direction of an egalitarian theory of justice. But in developing his general theory of exploitation and class, Roemer was still clinging by his fingertips to historical materialism. The transition to socialism remains premature just so long as it is capitalism that holds out the best material prospects for the 'least-advantaged group' (understood as the 'exploited coalition').

There are two different ways of interpreting this conclusion. Firstly, that no society is properly a just one unless and until it is an efficient

one, that is, efficient from the perspective of the 'worst-off' group. So long as the exploited do better under capitalism than they would do under socialism, then capitalism is just. This would be Rawls's position, from which it follows that his theory of justice would favour socialism wherever socialism held out the best prospects for the 'exploited coalition'; from which it would follow that nothing important distinguishes Roemer's (allegedly) Marxian position from Rawls's (professedly) liberal one.

Secondly, the claim might be that an unjust society could be justified on the grounds of its efficiency, but would remain an unjust society all the same. This is not Rawls's position, although it can be argued that it ought to be.[65] Now, if Roemer takes this line, then the argument that capitalism is unjust has weak implications (practical and theoretical): both because socialism is unjust for similar reasons; and also because everything now hinges, as for Rawls, upon the relative efficiency of rival forms of social organisation. Roemer opts for this interpretation. Against Rawls, he argues that 'although early capitalism was progressive, and its exploitation was socially necessary, it was unjust'. But Rawls cannot say this. 'If capitalist relations of property are progressive in the Marxian sense in early capitalism, then early capitalism is just for Rawls'.[66] It remains the case, however, that Roemer and Rawls would favour socialism under an identical set of conditions, and for essentially the same reasons: capitalism is no longer justifiable when it ceases to be optimally advantageous to the 'least-advantaged group' (understood, by Roemer, as the 'exploited coalition').

In *GTEC*, Roemer explains that it is anyway not his intention to 'locate the historical materialist imperative in considerations of justice'.[67] Unlike Rawls, his appeal there is not directly to egalitarianism, but to a distinctively Marxian form of self-actualisation. Be this as it may, Roemer has more recently claimed that the most important work for those concerned with the long-term prospects for socialism 'is that of political philosophers on egalitarian theories of justice'.[68] Can socialists who are interested in justice finally content themselves with slightly modified versions of left-liberalism? Roemer quotes Brian Barry with approval: '[i]f socialism is identified with public ownership and equality, then this type of liberalism is compatible with socialism';[69] and 'the goal of socialism is best thought of as a kind of egalitarianism'.[70]

This basic (re)orientation is shared by all the leading exponents of Analytical Marxism. For example, Van Parijs is 'committed . . . to some broadly "Rawlsian" conception of justice';[71] Elster to the basic principle that informs 'the writings of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin';[72] and Cohen to a form of egalitarianism – 'equality of opportunity of

welfare' – derived and defended through an 'immanent critique' of the work of Ronald Dworkin.[73] Levine has recently summarised this general trajectory, with particular reference to Roemer's general theory of exploitation:

> In considering the moral philosophical implications of the concept . . . Roemer has moved . . . onto the terrain of such writers as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and even Robert Nozick, to a point where he has raised significant doubts about the normative importance of exploitation itself. This turn towards liberal and even libertarian social philosophy is unexceptional: there is hardly any other – and certainly no better – way to think about distributive justice.[74]

For better or worse, they are all – in this respect, at least – liberals now.

Two central points regarding this turn towards mainstream moral and political philosophy are worth emphasising. Firstly, whatever its merits or demerits, there is nothing distinctively *Marxist* about this work: no fundamental differences – of method, meta-ethics, or normative principle – now divides Analytical Marxism from contemporary left(ish)-liberalism. The argument is increasingly about which set of economic and social institutions – liberal-capitalist or socialist – would best realise shared values. Secondly, this ethical project has been increasingly divorced from Marxism's explanatory programme. *Justice éternelle* courts reason, rather than any particular social class. It is unlikely to motivate a revolutionary struggle by the working class (or any coalition of social classes), or a project of parliamentary reformism with any distinctively socialist normative basis. What it does do, is provide one agreed standard of commensuration for political philosophers of different persuasions concerned to compare and contrast rival institutional frameworks. Liberals might be forced – by their own fundamental principles – to favour some form of socialism, but not, therefore, to concede anything to *Marxism*: either to its explanatory programme, or to any distinctively socialist moral philosophy.

The procedure the Analytical Marxists have recently adopted in defence of socialism is this: firstly, to defend a set of values which should be accepted by any rational person, and should appeal to first principles shared by (most) non-Marxist political theorists – freedom, justice, democracy, autonomy, etc.; secondly, to construct a range of institutional models – *laissez-faire*, Keynesian, 'basic-income' capitalism, planned and market socialism, etc.; and, finally, to compare and contrast these models in order to determine which would best realise the common principles shared by the fraternity of rational political

philosophers. A common conclusion has been that, relative to these values, market socialism is preferable to all rival forms of socialism and to any conceivable species of capitalism (with the possible exception of Nordic social democracy.)[75] If this sort of conclusion represents the best efforts of an intellectually mature Marxism, then we might be tempted to conclude, not only that Marxists grow up to be left-liberals, but also that they devoutly hope that rational left-liberals will grow up to be converts to market socialism.

The defence of market socialism has been developed in recent works by both Elster and Roemer.[76] In *Solomonic Judgements*, Elster argues that significant political reforms are rarely motivated by instrumental goals, but rather take the form of protracted, reformist struggles against injustice (for example, in the fight for the extension of the suffrage or for a welfare state).[77] It is the concern of decent people with the right to equal concern and respect which might conceivably bring about a future transition from capitalism to a form of 'market socialism' – combining worker ownership of the means of production with the operation of free markets (unavoidable given the failure of economic planning, but necessarily reproducing 'competitiveness and even hostility'). Market socialism would not end competitiveness, unemployment, significant pay differentials (between similarly skilled workers in different firms), or the production of frivolous consumption goods. But it would move us a little nearer to a 'norm of equality' agreeable to all rational citizens – so long, that is, as they are not blinded by their own narrow, sectional interests. The liberal basis of this vision – in particular, the conception of social and political institutions as guardians of the 'common interest', rather than of the interests of social classes – is made quite explicit: '[s]ociety', Elster declares, 'is . . . a joint venture, but the bond between members is not simply one of mutual advantage, but also one of mutual respect and tolerance'.[78]

In *AFFS*, Roemer also defends market socialism through an appeal to 'a kind of egalitarianism'.[79] What socialists want, he claims, is equality of opportunity for self-realisation and welfare, political influence, and social status (which, he notes, may come as a pleasant surprise to liberals). What socialists want, then, is not necessarily – at least, in the short term – equality of property rights or common ownership of the means of production: '[s]ocialism should want those property rights that will bring about a society that best promotes equality of opportunity for everyone. One cannot honestly say, at this point in history, that one knows what those property rights must be.'[80] Roemer might have added that left-liberals too will favour that set of property rights able

to deliver 'a society that best promotes equality of opportunity for everyone'. Principles are not in dispute here: everything hangs upon the extent to which rival social structures would respect and promote shared principles.

The efforts of Van Parijs (and Van der Veen) to defend a form of basic income capitalism, originally intended to effect the transition from capitalism to communism without requiring anything so troublesome as a detour via socialism, have culminated in similar fashion.[81] The original idea here was a straightforward one. Communism, they argued, is (partly) constituted by its distinctive principle of distribution: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' (the 'needs principle'). It follows from this that the transformation of distributional mechanisms required for the inauguration of communist society does not *logically* entail the abolition of private ownership of the means of production (capitalism) in favour of common ownership (socialism), that is, not if private ownership can be shown to be compatible with distribution on the basis of human need. Indeed, in view of the insistence of Marxism's founders that the final commencement of 'truly human history' is possible only on the basis of the production of material abundance, there are good reasons for thinking that capitalism is, at least, no less capable – and, quite possibly, more capable – of delivering the necessary levels of material production to underwrite this transition. Moreover, the gradual transformation of capitalism into communism implies a reformist political strategy, thus circumventing all the risks and uncertainties – as well as the predictable economic disruption – that would inevitably accompany the attempt to abolish private ownership of the means of production. Initially, then, Van Parijs and his supporters argued that it was possible to get from capitalism to communism without tears, by introducing, and gradually increasing, basic income grants, designed to secure for all the means to satisfy their needs within – otherwise untransformed – capitalist economies: that is, in apparent defiance of the structural logic of capitalism, no-one would any longer be forced to 'earn' basic income by selling their labour-power (or by exploiting any other scarce resource).

More recently, however, the principal advocates of basic income capitalism have abandoned the argument that the gradual extension of basic income might culminate in the abolition of capitalism and the inauguration of communism, in favour of a Rawlsian defence of the basic income proposal.[82] The question now is whether (basic income) capitalism or (basic income) socialism offers the best possible deal to the least-advantaged individual. The answer is – imponderables and incalculables cast aside – that the worst-off would probably fare best in

some sort of mixed economy. Thus, setting out to achieve an unlikely reconciliation between capitalist property relations and communist distributional principles, the advocates of the basic income proposal have finally abandoned Marx for Rawls, socialism for capitalism, and the prospect of communism for the resurrection of the mixed economy.

In view of the manifest inadequacies of Marx's account of morality, it might be thought, as Levine argues, that this 'turn towards liberal . . . social philosophy is unexceptional: there is hardly any other – and certainly no better – way to think about distributive justice'. However, this is to ignore the distinctiveness of a tradition of socialist morality that has attacked liberalism for its exclusive preoccupation with the rights of (atomised) individuals, and for its corresponding neglect of the values of community and human solidarity. Thus, in a review of Roemer's *AFFS*, John Gray – hardly a friend of socialism – takes Roemer to task for a defence of market socialism that

> incorporates all the worst features of contemporary Anglo-American liberal moral and political philosophy – such as its individualistic and legalistic preoccupation with justice and rights and its formalist and unhistorical methodology of 'concepts' and 'principles' – and eliminates all the most valuable elements in socialist thought . . . . The sense of human subjects as necessarily historical beings which is prominent in classical Marxism, and the view of human well-being as indissolubly linked with the flourishing of historical communities and solidarities which figures in many traditions of ethical socialism are absent.[83]

More fundamentally, the question arises of whether the appeal to rational and universal moral principles is compatible with a distinctively Marxist explanatory theory or political strategy. Consider the allegiance to 'weak historical materialism'. Marxists must argue that socialism is only materially possible once a certain level of technological development has been obtained. Does this claim, then, distinguish their position from that held by prominent left-liberals? There are reasons to doubt that it does. This claim makes most sense if historical materialism is understood to be animated by a commitment to human emancipation, and not to justice: the possibility of emancipating humankind does require a sufficiently high level of material production; an egalitarian distribution of resources does not (a mass of porridge and acorns could be equally distributed, as surely as the means of production in an advanced industrial country). What we might say, then, is that there is a trade-off between justice and efficiency: until material production has risen to some (unspecified) level, efficiency trumps justice; thereafter,

justice trumps efficiency. But it is far from clear why this should be the case: what is wrong with preferring increased justice to increased efficiency, even in capitalism's earliest stages? Certainly, there is nothing much here that could not be conceded by many left-liberals. Values are plural and non-compossible. It may be that justice should be sacrificed to technological development until a certain level of development has been achieved; it may be that once human industry has developed to that level some form of market socialism will be dictated by liberal principles of justice (this is, for example, entirely consistent with Rawls's theory of justice).

What about the 'narrative of class struggle'? The struggle between social classes within dynamic and contradictory social systems has now been all but entirely superseded by the struggle of intellectuals over institutional frameworks as a model for political reform. At most, the working class might be thought less inclined to reject those principles acceptable to all rational and honest persons, because these principles are fortuitously coincident with their class interests – but don't bank on it. Roemer despairs of the prospects of a transition to market socialism in the advanced industrial countries, pinning his hopes upon Eastern Europe – a blank page amenable to the institutional designs of West European intellectuals of the Left as well as of the Right. It might be concluded then, that Analytical Marxism is now a species of ethical socialism: period. The development of an essentially left-liberal moral theory *may* be unavoidable, but it is, on the face of it, incompatible with allegiance to the central theses of Marxism. If it is the rational defence of a liberal moral philosophy that is to justify and to motivate any prospective transition from capitalism to socialism, then it is, at least, unclear what explanatory space remains to either the narrative of technological development or the narrative of class struggle.

8

Conclusion

The congruence between the assessments of Marxism offered by its 'analytical' opponents (Russell, Acton, Plamenatz, Popper, etc.), and the more recent pronouncements of its 'analytical' reconstructors, is sufficiently striking for one to be tempted to conclude that the whole Analytical Marxist project had been completed some decades prior to its official commencement – although no-one for a moment imagined that this had been a Marxist project (despite the occasional left-wing sympathies of some of its leading protagonists). This is too strong, but it does direct us to the central questions that need to be addressed in conclusion. Is Analytical Marxism, or has it ever been, in any informative sense a species of Marxism? Does it offer any secure basis for the resurgence of a radical theoretical and/or political practice of Marxian pedigree? Have its protagonists succeeded in importing Marxist insights into the mainstream of academic social science and philosophy? To what advantage, if any, have the Hegelian trappings been dropped?

Summary responses to these questions are liable to mislead. The term 'Analytical Marxism' has designated a heterogeneous body of work. Indeed, as we have seen, there have been profound disagreements – methodological, as well as substantive – *within* Analytical Marxism: for example, Cohen *vs.* Elster (functional explanation and methodological individualism); Wright, Levine and Sober *vs.* Elster (methodological individualism); Brenner *vs.* Cohen (technological determinism); Wright, Levine and Sober *vs.* Cohen (technological determinism); and Przeworski *vs.* Roemer (class and exploitation).

If anything, the founders of Analytical Marxism have found still less

to agree upon in recent times. Cohen – in spite of growing disillusionment with Marxism in general, and virtual abandonment of the defence of historical materialism in particular – has remained most resolutely on the Left. Alongside of a timely assault upon the New Model Labour Party (in its pre-Blairite incarnation),[1] his most important recent publication collects a series of articles – written, for the most part, during the last decade – under the title *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*. This collection is a revealing one. In it Cohen attempts to defend a form of socialist egalitarianism against what he perceives to be the serious threat posed by Nozickian libertarianism – if socialism is to repel libertarianism, he claims, then standard Marxist arguments against capitalist exploitation must be dropped. In the introduction to this collection, he concedes that if anything remains of discernibly Marxist pedigree in the recent works of Roemer, Van Parijs *et al*, it is no more than a commitment to distinctive values – Analytical Marxism is now barely distinguishable from the utopian socialism vilified by Marxism's founders. (Indeed, Elster and Przeworski have recently abandoned the September Group altogether – perhaps on the grounds that they could no longer honestly claim to be engaged in the project of reconstructing Marxism.[2])

This collection concludes with the republication of 'The Future of a Disillusion': the ties which once bound Cohen to the international communist movement find expression here in some lamentations in the wake of the collapse of historical communism; more recent disillusionment with the trajectory of Analytical Marxism is attested in his return of a diagnosis of sour grapes upon the advocates of market socialism: 'I . . . think that market socialism is at best second best, even if it is the best (or more than the best) at which it is now reasonable to aim . . . many socialist intellectuals who think otherwise are indulging in Adaptive Preference'.[3] So disagreement persists; having entered this caveat, however, it is possible to reach some general conclusions regarding the results of, and prospects for, Analytical Marxism.

We have seen that doubts concerning the self-designation of the 'paradigm' as a species of Marxism have been voiced by a number of its Marxist critics, themselves representing a range of different orientations within contemporary Marxism. Lebowitz declares that Analytical Marxism 'is in essence anti-Marxist';[4] Locke Anderson and Thompson maintain that it represents a 'specter of respectability' to be exorcised as a condition of Marxism's further progress;[5] while Ellen Wood argues that – in its principal features – it is 'very like a caricature of Anglo-American liberalism as it has evolved since the seventeenth century'.[6]

But it is not only the paradigm's Marxist critics who have doubted its Marxist credentials. In a review article from 1987, Alan Ryan expresses a similar bemusement concerning the insistence of its principal advocates that what they have been doing is reconstructing Marxism. In Cohen's work he detects the operation of a powerful intelligence locked in mortal combat with 'an essentially sentimental and old-fashioned communism';[7] of the work of Elster, he asks 'if what is most distinctively Marxian is methodologically flawed, and Marx "makes sense" only when translated into the terms of *Ulysses and the Sirens* and *Sour Grapes*, why bother with Marx at all?';[8] as for Roemer's ethical egalitarianism, 'it is not Marx, nor Marxist'.[9] Ryan concludes that the Analytical Marxists will increasingly be driven to participation 'in the endless and repetitive debates over Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin which constitute the staple diet of academic political theory': 'the project of showing that Marx can be made to talk in ways that Oxford philosophers of thirty years ago would have thought sufficiently sanitary seems a mistake. It satisfies neither the desire to get inside the mind of the historical Marx nor the need for an intellectual apparatus adequate to the complexities and absurdities of the late 20th century.'[10] Seven years on, and the leading Analytical Marxists are to be found, as Ryan anticipated, discussing the work of Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin. In Elster's latest work, Marx hardly gets a mention: at least, not Karl (there is discussion of the kind of irrationality evidenced in Groucho's declaration that he would not belong to any club willing to accept him as a member).[11] As with Elster, so with Roemer and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Cohen.[12]

Similar doubts have been expressed by one of Marxism's most trenchant contemporary critics: John Gray. For Gray, the advent of an Analytical Marxism is trebly anachronistic. In the first place, because the application of state-of-the-art methodological tools to classical Marxism has all but inevitably resulted in the virtual reproduction – albeit in a different register – of the critique produced by that generation of Marxism's Anglophone critics who fashioned those tools in the first place: 'analytical Marxism will flourish and expand just in so far as it possesses those mythic elements in Marx's thought that it is committed to shedding . . . [but] . . . [a]t the same time, eliminating the mythic content of Marxism will rob it of its distinctive power and speed its recuperation by bourgeois social science.'[13] Secondly, Gray argues that Analytical Marxism has accommodated itself to a 'mainstream' (liberal) moral and political philosophical practice that is itself increasingly anachronistic. The Analytical Marxists, having taken up their stand on the supposed *terra firma* of mainstream Anglophone

philosophy, have found since that this ground has started to move beneath their feet – not least, as the ahistoricism of mainstream (liberal) philosophy has come under assault from the 'communitarians' (including some prominent refugees from Hegelian Marxism). Finally, Gray maintains that Analytical Marxism is politically anachronistic. A refusal to engage with current historical conditions has exacerbated a professorial remoteness largely ignoring – or, at least, failing seriously to engage – both the historical reasons for Marxism's demise and, relatedly, the political problems confronting socialism at the close of the twentieth century. Thus, Gray writes, in the course of a devastating critique of Roemer's general theory of exploitation:

> When we return from the dream world of Roemer's theorems to history and common experience, we discover that every market failure present in capitalist systems, such as environmental pollution, discoordination, worker alienation and under-employment, is replicated on a far greater scale (though often covertly) under socialist central planning institutions. These facts, which are commonplaces under the Soviet glasnost, are yet too subversive to be mentioned by Roemer . . . . The upshot of Roemer's neglect of the real world is that, with all its gimmick-ridden formalism, his reconstruction of Marxian economic philosophy has the intellectual relevance of a dated crossword puzzle.[14]

More recently, where Roemer has seriously confronted the failure of historical communism, he has failed to offer any serious challenge to liberal orthodoxies. Far from offering 'a future for socialism', Roemer's defence of market socialism provides further 'testimony to the fact that liberal thought enjoys a hegemony that is now almost wholly unchallenged' – at least, within the English-speaking world.[15]

The paradigm's exponents have responded in various ways to the criticism that, whatever it is that they are now doing, it cannot be properly described as 'reconstructing Marxism'. One common response has been broadly to concede the point, while denying its importance. Thus, if Cohen originally sought to retain a degree of fidelity to 'what Marx wrote', Roemer was soon to question whether any such constraint was appropriate to an intellectually mature reconstruction of Marxism: '[f]or the most part, workers in the new tradition are not particularly concerned with what Marx wrote or said. What matters is the coherence of the idea.'[16] Has this work, then, remained recognisably Marxist? Roemer confesses that he is no longer sure that it has: 'it is no longer clear what characterises Marxian scholarly work, nor that it should be characterisable'. It does not really matter, then, whether Analytical Marxism is appropriately designated as Marxism: what

matters is the 'coherence' of ideas and not their consonance with those of Marxism's founders. This is incongruous coming from a group of theorists self-consciously allied to a philosophical school founded upon the insistence that everything is what it is and not something else. But to insist – contra Roemer – that what matters is what Marx wrote, and not the coherence of the arguments, would be to indulge in the sort of hagiography that has been rightly disparaged by the Analytical Marxists. The appropriate response, however, is clear enough: if Marxism is to be successfully reconstructed, then this requires that – at least in its essentials – what Marx wrote is coherent.

Alternatively, the paradigm's exponents have sought to redefine their Marxism. For example, in the opening pages of *ITKM*, Elster wearily rehearses his stock response to those tempted to wonder why he continues to ally himself to Marxism:

> To the question whether I am a Marxist, or why, on intellectual grounds, I would want to call myself a Marxist, I have a well-rehearsed answer: 'If by a Marxist you mean someone who holds all the beliefs that Marx himself thought were his most important ideas, including scientific socialism, the labour theory of value, the theory of the falling rate of profit, the unity of theory and practice in revolutionary struggle, and the utopian vision of a transparent communist society, then I am certainly not a Marxist. But if by a Marxist, you mean someone who can trace the ancestry of his most important beliefs back to Marx, then I am indeed a Marxist. For me this includes, notably, the dialectical method and the theory of alienation, exploitation and class struggle in a suitably revised and generalised form.'[17]

This is typical of Elster. To require Marxists to believe *all* those things that are characteristic of the sort of Marxism he rejects would be far too strong: for example, this would disqualify someone committed to 'scientific socialism, the labour theory of value, the theory of the falling rate of profit', but doubtful concerning 'the utopian vision of a transparent communist society'. The polemical intent here is clear enough: no-one could sensibly believe all of these things. But it might be thought that to be a Marxist requires commitment to at least some of them. What about Elster's depiction of his sort of 'Marxism'? Notice here the invocation of his intellectual biography: the ancestry of many of his most important ideas can be traced back to Marx. The suggestion that to be a Marxist is to have autobiographical roots in the Marxist tradition is common to many of the recent pronouncements of the paradigm's exponents: to be a 'Marxist', in the 'analytical' sense, is once to have been a Marxist. However, Elster proceeds to signal his continued commitment to some core Marxist beliefs: 'notably, the

dialectical method and the theory of alienation, exploitation and class struggle in a suitably revised and generalised form'. But the 'dialectical method' is here understood in such a way that it is identified with those forms of 'counterfinality' which Popper *opposed to dialectics*;[18] the theory of alienation is conceded only in so far as this is consistent with a rejection of Marx's philosophical anthropology, and with profound scepticism regarding the prospects for communism (or anything like it); and the concept of exploitation is 'suitably revised' when understood as a fallible index to inegalitarian property distributions. As for class struggle, it has not featured at all in Elster's recent work.

If the paradigm's central protagonists have been more or less untroubled by doubts regarding their continued allegiance to Marxism, some of those theorists whose commitment to Analytical Marxism has been more circumspect have taken these objections seriously. In 'What Is a Marxist Today?', Levine, taking Analytical Marxism to be representative of contemporary Marxism, has conceded that 'it is . . . far from clear that there is enough that is genuinely and distinctively Marxian to hold that Marxism exists as a systematic collection of substantive claims'.[19] He argues that to describe oneself as a Marxist continues to have political resonances, and, combined with an allegiance to a distinctively Marxian agenda, can amount to something more than an 'expression of dissidence . . . ultimately void of content'.[20] Such an agenda would comprise the beliefs that 'in some sense and to some extent, history is shaped and moved by class struggles;'[21] that it is not 'consciousness' that determines 'being', but 'being' that determines 'consciousness'; that social revolutions are central to social and historical explanation; and, in particular, that communism is a desirable political objective:

> declared Marxists have always supported communism, at least officially; and, in the absence of sound arguments to the contrary, the appeal of the vision they promote is reason enough to endorse their stance, even should historical materialism eventually prove indefensible. This goal virtually establishes the Marxian agenda in its contemporary form.[22]

This 'agenda', allied to a radical political practice, Levine concludes, can survive the demise of 'Marxism' as traditionally understood.

Levine, then, adds his voice to those of Lebowitz, Locke Anderson, Thompson, Ellen Wood, Ryan and Gray: the 'Analytical Marxists' have failed to reconstruct Marxism. But a phoenix may yet arise from these ashes: a Marxian agenda which, at the cost of diminishing the left's pretensions, initiates a radical theoretical and political programme

of recognisably Marxist pedigree. But that generation of Anglophone intellectuals which sought to demolish Marxism – 'the illusion of the epoch' – did not deny, and sometimes explicitly affirmed, that history was 'in some sense and to some extent' shaped by class struggle; and, while they questioned its cogency and feasibility, they not infrequently conceded the desirability of communism. Having identified the broad contours of the Marxian agenda, Levine concludes, that '[m]ore precise specifications would undermine universal consent'.[23] Leaving aside the question of whether the quest for 'universal consent' should serve as a prior constraint upon the identification of a distinctively Marxian programme, one suspects that many avowed non-Marxists would have no very serious objections to this agenda. Conversely, there is some doubt that it would be conceded by some of the leading Analytical Marxists. In particular, there is little evidence in the recent works of Roemer and Elster to indicate that they still regard communism – as traditionally conceived – as a feasible (or even desirable) objective. Whatever one might think of market socialism, it is not communism. Nor do its principal advocates conceive it as a transitional phase *en route* to communism.

In the current historical conjuncture, however, the question of the feasibility and desirability of communism is not a pressing one. Most of the Marxian Left would concede that a transition to Market Socialism, or to something along the lines of Nordic social democracy, would now be a spectacular victory. But Analytical Marxism has not been allied to any radical political practice; nor is there any serious prospect of it having much impact upon current social and political developments. This work has had no noticeable influence over the programmes of any significant – or, for that matter, any marginal – political party or movement. Nor is this surprising: in part, because current historical conditions are so desperately inhospitable, but also because of the donnish remoteness of the whole project. Thus Ellen Wood concludes that all ties to the labour movement have been severed in favour of ties to the academy: the Analytical Marxists have adopted 'standards of judgement and a sense of proportion derived not from the political arena but from the Senior Common Room . . . where the principal adversary is likely to be a professional neo-classical economist'.[24] Somehow collective action problems, political psychology, the case for equality of opportunity of welfare, the concept of collective unfreedom, and sophisticated models of a feasible market socialism seem distinctly remote from the problems of a Left that is currently confronting a triumphant Right, and has long since been abandoned by a mainstream 'opposition' that has ditched socialism in

favour of (slightly) nicer capitalism under new and – allegedly – more competent management.

This is not to indulge in crude anti-intellectualism, but it is to make a point about what the Analytical Marxists have preoccupied themselves with, and the audience to which they have addressed themselves. It is difficult to imagine anybody being radicalised through an encounter with this paradigm's seminal texts; or even that anyone lacking the requisite specialist education would understand many of them. For all their commitment to 'rigour and clarity', it is evident that the Analytical Marxists have sought to make things 'clear' only to an audience composed all but exclusively of their 'fellow professionals'. Thus, Nielsen, in the course of a sympathetic review, concedes that the charge of 'scholasticism' is a serious one. However, he concludes that Analytical Marxism is nonetheless a 'political' project in virtue of the fact that its leading exponents 'defend left-wing positions and in various ways have close affinities with Marx'.[25] To put it no more strongly, this appeals to a curious definition of the 'political'. Levine reaches a similar conclusion to Nielsen: in view of Marxism's decline as a political programme '[w]e can expect Marxist social science and philosophy to become even more academic than it already is'.[26]

In conclusion, we might enter a summary verdict on the results of, and prospects for, Analytical Marxism from two different perspectives: from the perspective of those still committed to some version of Marxism, and from that of those avowedly hostile to Marxism.

Marxism's reconstructors have sought to convince those who have remained allied to the Marxist programme that many of the ideas which have mattered to them must be abandoned. The special theory of capitalism was ditched from the outset. Historical materialism is now, at best, a 'weak' and/or 'restricted' theory of historical development, with no theoretical purchase upon any prospective transition from capitalism to socialism. Class struggle remains of importance only in the sense that this is consistent with profound scepticism concerning the prospects for the radicalisation of the working class – and for its political prospects even were it to be radicalised; and with the failure to develop any theory relating class struggle to the developmental logic of capitalism – or even to show that capitalism has any developmental logic. In the wake of Marx's explanatory programme, the Analytical Marxists have dedicated themselves to the defence and advocacy of moral principles increasingly remote from the material interests of any social class, and increasingly indistinguishable from those of liberals. Of course, many on the Left may be impressed by the case for market socialism, and sympathetic to those moral principles

defended by Analytical Marxism's leading protagonists. There may be some consolation in believing that socialism would be a good thing. But, as Eric Hobsbawm once observed, 'moral victory' has too often served socialists as little more than a 'euphemism for defeat'.[27] Marxists might, then, justifiably conclude that the results of Analytical Marxism are a diminution of Marxism's 'theoretical pretensions' and socialism's political ambitions, amounting to an unconditional surrender to mainstream liberal philosophical and political practice; and that, understood as a Marxism, this 'paradigm' has no prospects.

Marxism's opponents have no reason to disagree with this assessment. But they will draw different conclusions. With justification, they might argue that Analytical Marxism has, at last, delivered the fatal blow to the whole Marxist project. Here, they might argue, we witness intellectuals of the highest calibre – starting out with profound attachments to Marxism, and applying higher standards of marxology than Marxism's earlier Anglophone critics – progressively demolishing the classical Marxism they had set out to resurrect. Marxism has finally been laid to rest by scholars disinclined to dance upon its grave: powerful intelligence casting aside the ties that bound. From this perspective, the results of Analytical Marxism have been a conclusive – partly because reluctant – refutation of Marxism. Its prospects? The recruitment of a group of formidable scholars to debates 'over Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin'. From both perspectives, then, Analytical Marxism marks an important defeat for Marxism.

Marxism's opponents, if they ever took any interest in Analytical Marxism, will simply pass on. For Marxist, and Marxian, theorists, however, Analytical Marxism represents a major intellectual challenge. Can Marxism survive the demise of its 'analytical' incarnation? Some obvious strategies are indicated.

Firstly, the methodological presuppositions of Analytical Marxism can be attacked. It has been argued here that the methodological commitments of the principal architects of Rational Choice Marxism (in particular, methodological individualism) are either mistaken or trivial – that is, far too trivial to support the wholesale methodological reorientation of Marxist scholarship demanded by Elster, Roemer *et al.* Clearly, however, it does not follow from the fact that flawed methodological assumptions have been implicated in the failure of this attempted reconstruction of Marxism that an adequate methodological framework would be hospitable to its successful reconstruction. Secondly, the interpretations of Marx and Marxism defended by the paradigm's principal exponents can be challenged. For example, the technological determinist reading of Marx's theory of history is a

highly controversial one. Technological determinism, it has been argued here, is in fact unreconstructable. Cohen's defence of that theory will remain of the first importance within the history of Marxist philosophy in virtue of its brilliance and (therefore) its finality – it is difficult to imagine that this defence could be improved upon, but it fails. If this is granted, then Analytical Marxism has settled the question of priority between the narrative of technological development and the narrative of class struggle in favour of the primacy of the relations of production. If Marx's theory of history has a future, then it rests with the development of the explanatory programme implicit in Brenner's historiography, and not with the technological determinist reading of historical materialism defended by Cohen in the paradigm's inaugural work. Thirdly, and relatedly, other tendencies within Marxism, all but ignored by the Analytical Marxists, can be reprised and revised – most obviously, by salvaging whatever is valuable in the work of leading thinkers identified with Western Marxism. It is difficult to believe that the work of such important theorists as Lukács, Gramsci, Sartre, Marcuse, Adorno, and Althusser has bequeathed (virtually) nothing worthy of incorporation within a reconstructed Marxism. Finally, the central claims of classical Marxism might be defended against the specific arguments developed by the Analytical Marxists: for example, a detailed defence of Marx's special theory of capitalism, if such a defence is possible; or, if not, the elaboration of an alternative account of the logic of capitalism capable of demonstrating its fundamental irrationality, accompanied by a demonstration of the ability of socialism to overcome that irrationality, is now long overdue.

The project of developing a successful alternative version of Marxism will demand an engagement with the work of the Analytical Marxists. The problems encountered by them in the course of their attempt to reconstruct Marxism are serious ones. The rise and demise of Analytical Marxism has foregrounded two central obstacles which will need to be surmounted if Marxism is to be salvaged. Firstly, the development of this 'paradigm' might appear to confirm the verdict of those of Marxism's Anglophone critics who argued that once Hegel was pronounced a 'dead dog', then (classical) Marxism was incapable of surviving as a distinctive research programme. Thus, Isaiah Berlin had written that 'Marx's immediate successors tended to minimise Hegel's influence upon him; but his vision of the world crumbles and yields only isolated insights if . . . the great unifying, necessary pattern in terms of which he thought, is left out or whittled down'.[28] At the same time, Elster's assault upon crude teleologism and the wilder shores of the dialectic is a powerful one. A necessary, but not sufficient,

condition for any future salvation of Marxism (or, at least, of central Marxist insights), may be to make sense of Hegel.

Secondly, if any future revival of Marxist theory is to contribute to the revival of radical political practice at the close of the twentieth century, then the problems of the constituency, agency and strategy for any prospective transition from capitalism to socialism will need to be confronted. Again, the development of Analytical Marxism has foregrounded the problems. Unable to demonstrate that capitalism suffers from any systemic and irremediable economic irrationality; profoundly pessimistic concerning the prospects for the radicalisation of the working class; accepting that, in the unlikely event that a mass socialist movement were to materialise in the advanced industrial democracies, it would be unlikely to prevail over police forces, armies, newspaper barons, international speculators, the IMF, etc.; arguing that successful participation in constitutional democratic processes requires social-democratic parties to embrace electoral strategies incompatible with the pursuit of radical political objectives; and urging trade unions – in lieu of socialism – to restrict wage demands in accordance with a strategy of 'moderate militancy' designed to secure the smooth accumulation of capital, the Analytical Marxists hold out little prospect of any 'future for socialism'. Recent arguments in support of market socialism have argued its moral superiority, and sought to demonstrate that such a variant of socialism could (in theory) combine economic efficiency and social justice, but they have provided no convincing answer to the question of how the historical ascendancy of liberal-capitalism is to be undone and a transition to socialism achieved. The leading architects of Analytical Marxism continue to believe that some form of socialism would be a good thing, even where they have ceased to have any sound reasons for believing that it is an historically possible thing. Yet, if Marxism is to survive as anything more than a set of isolated insights of merely academic interest, then this will require the revival of socialism as a political project, that is, a reforging of the interdependence of Marxist theory and socialist practice under inhospitable conditions characterised by the ideological triumph of liberal-capitalism and the manifest failures of historical communism (as well as the precipitate retreat of modern social-democratic parties from socialist – or even left-liberal – political prospectuses).

An engagement with these – and other – problems might well require the abandonment of Marxism in favour of a new radicalism appealing to a recognisably Marxian agenda. But not necessarily to the agenda proposed by the Analytical Marxists: there is little basis for the

renewal of radical philosophical or political practice in the recent works of Analytical Marxism's central figures. This self-professed 'paradigm' – if judged as a Marxist, or even as a Marxian, project – is (if not quite there already) approaching a dead end. If Analytical Marxism represents Marxism's most consummate expression, then Marxism is finished; if it represents the best hope for the revival of socialism, then it provides socialists with no grounds for optimism, and little grounds for hope. Here, of course, everything hinges upon the conditionals.

Notes

Preface

1. As Perry Anderson, amongst others, has indicated, the Anglo-Saxon world has never before produced 'any major body of Marxist theory', and this despite the fact that – at least, in Britain – 'the working class has remained industrially one of the most powerful in the world, and the calibre of Marxist *historiography* has probably been superior to that of any other country' (Anderson, P., *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 102).

2. The only book-length treatment to have appeared to date is Mayer, T., *Analytical Marxism* (Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi, 1994) which offers a clear, but almost wholly sympathetic, discussion of this work, and has little to say about its relationships to the Marxist tradition. The most important articles offering a critical review and discussion of the Analytical Marxist project include: Carling, A., 'Rational Choice Marxism', *New Left Review*, 160, 1986; McCarney, J., 'Analytical Marxism: A New Paradigm?', *Radical Philosophy*, 43, 1986; Anderson, W.H.L., and Thompson, F.W., 'Neoclassical Marxism', *Science & Society*, 52, 1988; Lebowitz, M., 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', *Science and Society*, 52, 1988; Callinicos, A., 'Introduction: Analytical Marxism', in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989; Hindess, B., 'Rational Choice Theory and the Analysis of Political Action', *Economy and Society*, August 1989; Martin, B., 'How Marxism became Analytical', *Journal of Philosophy*, November 1989; Wood, E., 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', *New Left Review*, 177, 1989; Moggach, D., 'Monadic Marxism: A Critique of Elster's Methodological Individualism', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, March 1991; Mongin, P., 'Rational Choice Theory Considered as Psychological and Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, March 1991. In addition, an edition of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* was recently dedicated to Analytical Marxism: Ware, R., and Nielsen, K., eds, *Analyzing Marxism – New Essays on Analytical Marxism*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol., 15, 1989.

Chapter 1

1. For example, seven years after its publication Elster was to recall that 'the publication of G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* came as a revelation. Overnight it changed the standards of rigour and clarity that were required to write on Marx and Marxism' *(MSM*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. xiv).
2. See, in particular, Elster, J., 'Review of Cohen', *Political Studies*, 28, 1980, and Elster, J., 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', *Theory and Society*, 11, 1982.
3. *ITKM*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 13.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. For biographical information, see, in particular Cohen's introductory remarks in *HLF* and his 'The Future of a Disillusion', *New Left Review*, 190, 1991, as well as Elster's Preface to *MSM*.
6. *HLF*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, p. xii.
7. Wright, E.O., *Classes*, Verso, London, 1985, p. 2.
8. See Wright, E.O., 'What is Analytical Marxism?', in Wright, E.O., *Interrogating Inequality*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 180–81.
9. Cohen, G.A., Elster, J. and Roemer, J., series eds, *Studies in Marxism and Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
10. *AM*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 4.
11. See, respectively, Roemer, J., *GTEC*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1982; Przeworski, A., *CSD*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985; and Wright, E.O., *Classes*.
12. Marx, K., *Capital*, Volume 1, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 280.
13. *GTEC*, p. viii.
14. *HLF*, p. 16.
15. Wright, E.O., Levine, A., and Sober, E., *Reconstructing Marxism*, Verso, London, 1992, p. xi.
16. *Classes*, p. 2.
17. More recently, Wright has identified four commitments which he claims to be distinctive of Analytical Marxism: (i) an allegiance to scientific norms – that is, an insistence upon testing theories against the empirical evidence, rather than canonising Marxism's founding texts; (ii) the close conceptual analysis of central Marxist concepts; (iii) careful specification of each logical step in the development of arguments – including here the employment of mathematical logic; and, (iv) a commitment to developing intentional explanations of social events and processes – that is, a preoccupation with providing explanations of 'action that results from conscious choices in which the costs and benefits are assessed over a range of feasible alternatives within a set of social constraints' *(Interrogating Inequality*, pp. 181–91).
18. *MSM*, p. xiv.
19. *AM*, p. 8.
20. Callinicos, A., 'Introduction' to *Marxist Theory*, p. 3.
21. Ayer, A.J. *et al.*, *The Revolution in Philosophy*, Macmillan, London, 1960, pp. 3–4. See Ree, J., 'English Philosophy in the Fifties', *Radical Philosophy*, 65, autumn 1993, for an excellent discussion of this period.
22. This approach, then, does not rule out the conclusion that there is, after all, no single Analytical Marxism, but instead a range of distinctive Analytical

Marxisms (this position is taken, for example, in Ware, R., 'How Marxism is Analysed: An Introduction', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 15, 1989). Ware also rejects its self-designation as a 'paradigm' – 'whatever is meant by that overworked term' (ibid., p. 2). I adopt this term partly because the Analytical Marxists do, and partly because – appropriately in this case – it is ambiguous and unclearly defined.

23. Hare, R.M., 'A School for Philosophers', *Ratio*, II, 2, February, 1960, pp. 114–15. Ree comments: 'the poor German might have started to retaliate by grilling Hare over his failure to distinguish between the word "Britain" and the word "Oxford"; but in the end it was a game the foreigners were bound to lose. If they agreed to translate themselves into a language acceptable to their hosts, they would have conceded that they have nothing un-Oxfordian to say; but if they refused, they would have condemned themselves as deliberate obfuscators' (Ree, J., 'English Philosophy in the Fifties', p. 14).

24. For example, consider the striking congruence between Elster's assessment of Marx's contribution to the development of social scientific methodologies, and that of that most ferocious critic of Marxism, Karl Popper. In the opening pages of *MSM*, Elster writes: 'I . . . believe that there is a specifically Marxist method for studying social phenomena . . . Marx was a pioneer in the use of this methodology. Even today, not all of his insights have been exhausted. To put it briefly, he emphasised the unintended consequences of human action, arguing that they are to be understood in the causal-cum-intentional framework that has become the standard language of the social sciences' (*MSM*, p. 3). Compare this with the following passage from Popper: 'the main task of the theoretical social sciences . . . is to trace the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions . . . Karl Marx himself was one of the first to emphasise the importance, for the social sciences, of these unintended consequences. In his more mature utterances, he says that we are all caught in the net of the social system. The capitalist is not a demonic conspirator, but a man who is forced by circumstances to act as he does; he is no more responsible for the state of affairs than is the proletarian' (Popper, K., *Conjectures and Refutations*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974, p. 341).

25. Wood, E., 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', *New Left Review*, 177, 1989, pp. 44ff.

26. Marcuse, H., *One Dimensional Man*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1991, p. 173.

27. *One Dimensional Man*, p. 174. Roy Edgley makes a similar point with reference to Oxford linguistic analysis: 'In the middle of a century of unprecedented human upheaval, a century of scientific and political revolutions, world wars, tyrannies and terrorism, the philosophical virtue of detachment came to be identified with a posture that combined donnish remoteness from these matters with a philosophical acceptance of the ordinary concepts in terms of which they are commonly misunderstood' (*Radical Philosophy Reader*, Verso, London, 1985, p. x).

28. *One Dimensional Man*, p. 175. Other 'silly scraps of speech' which have proved irresistible to the ordinary language philosopher include 'This looks to me now like a man eating poppies', 'He saw a robin', and 'I had a hat'.

29. *AM*, p. 192–3.

Chapter 2

1. See *MSM*, p. 4, or *ITKM*, p. 21.
2. See *MSM*, pp. 6–7 or *ITKM*, pp. 25ff.
3. This is another instance in which Elster's position is strikingly congruent with that developed by Popper in the course of his assault upon Marxism. In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Volume 2, Popper argues that Marx was frequently led astray because he sought to discover some ultimate meaning in human history. It was this desire to conceive history as a meaningful process that led Marx to an 'economic historicism', in which human actors were looked upon 'as mere puppets, irresistibly pulled by economic wires – by historical forces over which they have no control. The stage of history . . . is set in a social system which binds us all; it is set in the 'kingdom of necessity'. (But one day the puppets will destroy this system and attain the 'kingdom of freedom') (p. 191). Elster also follows Popper in arguing that Marx 'made sense' when he wrote like a 'methodological individualist'. During these lucid interludes Marx produced some pioneering work on the 'unintended consequences' of intentional human actions (See Popper, K., *Conjectures and Refutations*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974, pp. 341–2).
4. See, in particular, *MSM*, pp. 108–18. Elster allows only two forms of teleological explanation: (i) *subjective teleology* – events and processes are explained with exclusive reference to the intentional actions of conscious human agents; and (ii) *teleonomy* – adaptive behaviour is fashioned by a natural selection mechanism. Historical materialism cannot appeal to (ii), because history is non-repetitive and unpredictable, and revolutionary change occurs only infrequently (see, Elster, J., 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in Callinicos, A. ed., *Marxist Theory*, pp. 50–51).
5. In *MSM*, Elster illustrates this point with the example of investment patterns. Investment involves the sacrifice of present consumption for greater consumption in the longer term. This sort of strategy presupposes an intentional strategic actor, with the capacity to 'say Yes to unfavourable options now in order to be able to say Yes to very favourable ones in the future' (pp. 108–9).
6. See *MSM*, esp. pp. 108–9.
7. *MSM*, p. 116.
8. Isaiah Berlin also traces the genealogy of Marx's 'teleologism' back through Hegel to Leibniz. Leibniz argued that a proper definition of an object must explain why it necessarily develops as it does; each stage in an object's development is 'chargé du passé et gros de l'avenir'. Hegel applied this approach to human history because he was concerned with 'meaning' – 'unless some relation other than that of scientific causation be postulated, history becomes nothing but a succession of externally related events. To explain is to give rational grounds and not merely antecedents.' Berlin's conclusion provides an interesting contrast to Elster's: 'Marx's immediate successors tended to minimise Hegel's influence upon him; but his vision of the world crumbles and yields only isolated insights if, in the effort to represent him as he conceived himself, as the rigorous, severely factual social scientist, the great unifying, necessary pattern in terms of which he thought, is left out or whittled down' (Berlin, I., *Karl Marx – His Life and Environment*, fourth edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, pp. 36, 98–9).

9. See 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in Callinicos, A., *Marxist Theory*, pp. 57–8.
10. *MSM*, p. 28.
11. For an interesting analytical appropriation of this dialectical idiom, see Cohen, G.A., 'The Dialectic of Labour in Marx', reprinted in *HLF*.
12. *ITKM*, p. 36.
13. Acton, H.B., *The Illusion of the Epoch*, Cohen and West, London, 1962.
14. Popper, K., *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 316.
15. See *MSM*, pp. 37ff., or *ITKM*, pp. 38–9.
16. *MSM*, p. xiii.
17 Cited in Lukes, S., *Individualism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, p. 114. See also Popper, K., *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Volume 2, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966, pp. 91ff.
18. Elster, J., *The Cement of Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 248.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 250.
21. See, for example, *MSM*, pp. 5–8, and Elster, J., 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in *AM*, pp. 204–7.
22. See Wright, Levine and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, pp. 116–20.
23. Ibid., p. 118.
24. Moggach, D., 'Monadic Marxism: A Critique of Elster's Methodological Individualism', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, March, 1991, p. 50.
25. Lebowitz, M., 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', *Science and Society*, 52, 1988, p. 203. Recall here Marx's famous condemnation of those economic and social theories that conceived *historical* individuals as so many isolated, and pre-historical, *Robinsonades*: 'Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure. The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life, as cultural historians imagine. As little as Rousseau's social contract, which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relation and connection by contract, rests on such naturalism. This is the semblance, the merely aesthetic semblance of the Robinsonades, great and small. It is, rather, the anticipation of 'civil society', in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth. In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods made him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomeration. Smith and Ricardo still stand with both feet on the shoulders of the eighteenth-century prophets, in whose imaginations this eighteenth-century individual – the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century – appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history's point of departure' (Marx, K. *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 83).
26. *MSM*, p. 6.

27. In *The Cement of Society*, Elster writes as if the predication 'powerful' would still adhere to the *particular* individuals who possessed it within existing capitalist societies if these social relationships and their institutional supports were to disappear. 'The strong prefer the minimal regime, which facilitates the accumulation of wealth, over the more inclusive regime; but they prefer the latter over a lawless state of nature. For the purpose of accumulating wealth, social democracy is more efficient than slavery, even though unfettered capitalism is even better. *Unlike the weak, however, the strong would survive in the state of nature* [my emphasis]. Hence they can impose the minimal regime, since they can threaten to withdraw to the state of nature' (p. 13). The powerful – unlike the powerless – do not need social relations at all!

28. Luke, S., *Individualism*, pp. 121–2.

29. Bhaskar, R., *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 70.

30. Marx, K., *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in Tucker, R. ed., *Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 595.

31. Carling, A., 'Rational Choice Marxism', *New Left Review*, 160, 1986, p. 30.

32. Elster, J., *Political Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 7.

33. *MSM*, p. 4.

34. A classic instance – much discussed by Elster – of the operation of these sorts of 'hot mechanisms' is provided in La Fontaine's fable of the fox and the sour grapes. The fox convinces himself that the grapes are sour, not because there is any evidence that they are sour, but because he cannot get to them. Desires are adjusted in such a way as to discount the attractiveness of unachievable options. Conversely, some individuals may want what they cannot have, simply because they cannot have it (children providing an obvious exemplar). Elster has dedicated a number of books to the investigation of these sorts of sub-intentional causal mechanisms. See, in particular, *Sour Grapes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983; *Ulysses and the Sirens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984; and *Political Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

35. See *MSM*, pp. 18ff.

36. *MSM*, p. 19.

37. *ITKM*, p. 194.

38. Menger, C. , *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences*, New York University Press, New York, 1985, p. 146.

39. *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 342.

40. *MSM*, p. 3.

41. Ibid., p. 24.

42. *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 343.

43. Ibid.

44. Popper, K., *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Volume 2, p. 84.

45. *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 344. Elster's similar hostility to 'historicism' leads him to a similar conclusion in *MSM*: 'The main objection . . . to speculative theories of history resting on the notion of *'reculer pour mieux sauter'* is practical, not theoretical. Their intellectual shortcomings, though serious when measured by intellectual standards, are of little import compared to the political disasters they can inspire' (pp. 117–18).

46. For further discussion of this and related points see McCarney, J.,

'Elster, Marx and Methodology', in Ware, R. and Nielsen, K. eds, *Analyzing Marxism*.

47. 'The explananda of intentional explanations are individual actions. When collective action is explained by its goal or purpose, this must either be understood distributively, in the sense that each actor in the group acts for the sake of that goal, or with reference to the goal or purpose of leaders who are able to induce or compel others to execute their policy. The crucial step in intentional explanation is the specification of the goal – the future state of affairs for the sake of which the action is undertaken. The action may then be explained by the intended consequence, that is, the realisation of that state. The explanation is in no way invalidated if the consequence does not in fact come about, nor if it is logically incoherent so that it could not conceivably come about' (*MSM*, p. 8).

48. *ITKM*, pp. 25–6.

49. Elster distinguishes between three kinds of interdependencies: (i) *the reward of each depends upon the choice of all* – this applies in those cases of counterfinality considered in the previous section (if all players adopt the locally rational strategy then each achieves a sub-optimal outcome, but if only one player were to adopt it then it would be the optimal strategy); (ii) *the reward of each depends upon the reward of all* (if I am altruistic then your gain is my gain, but if I am envious then your gain is my loss); and (iii) *the choice of each depends upon the choice of all* (on the assumption that each actor behaves rationally, to arrive at the optimal solution he or she must anticipate the decisions of others, aware that they are also attempting to anticipate his or her decisions). Game theory is concerned with exploring the decisions which will be made by rational agents in situations in which there exist complex sets of interdependencies (*MSM*, p. 10).

50. See Mackie, J.L., *Ethics – Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, pp. 115–20. Mackie also discusses how things alter where prisoners' dilemmas are iterated – thus permitting the players to adopt 'tit-for-tat' strategies (etc). See also *MSM*, pp. 358–71.

51. See *MSM*, pp. 358–71.

52. Olson, M., *The Logic of Collective Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, p. 2.

53. Ibid., p. 108.

54. See Downs, A., *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper and Row, New York, 1957; and Przeworski, A., *CSD*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985. Przeworski's work will be discussed in chapter 7.

55. Wood, E., 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 44.

56. Moggach, D., 'Monadic Marxism: A Critique of Elster's Methodological Individualism', p. 46. Elster's position, argues Moggach, appeals to a 'philosophically primitive' conception of rationality; it 'depicts the subject as a given, self-propelled source of intentional designs and the sovereign author or cause of his projects' (pp. 45–6). This impoverished view of the human subject, and therefore of human rationality, has been attacked by most of Rational Choice Marxism's more prominent critics; for example, Ellen Wood – having noted Elster's depiction of the experience of guilt and shame as a 'utility fine' – writes that 'the RCM image of human nature has more in common with the "economic man" of liberalism than with historical materialism.

It is difficult to imagine that any profound moral insights will emerge from this banal and shrivelled *homo economicus*.' ('Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 83.)

57. *Sour Grapes*, p. 30.

58. Ibid., p. 1.

59. Ibid., p. 17.

60. 'The Elsterian programme obviously requires moving *from the formal to the genetic*: this implies investigating the strength of the arguments and data on which beliefs rely, as well as the rational (that is to say, autonomous) or irrational ways in which desires are formed. As far as beliefs are concerned, the task is so broad that it covers the entire project of an epistemology, and by Elster's own admission, it remains unfulfilled.' (Mongin, P., 'Rational Choice Theory Considered as Psychology and Moral Philosophy, *Philosophy of Social Science*, March 1991, pp. 21–2.)

61. *Sour Grapes*, pp. 35ff.

62. Moggach, D., 'Monadic Marxism: A Critique of Elster's Methodological Individualism', p. 54.

63. 'Laden with "endowments" in the form of a whole system of social relations and structural necessities, the "individual" turns out to be an embodied structure, and when the moment of choice arrives, there is nothing important left to do.' (Wood, E., 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 59.)

64. 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 48.

65. Ibid., pp. 48–9.

66. Hindess, B., 'Rational Choice Theory and the Analysis of Political Action', *Economy and Society*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1989, p. 271.

67. Hindess argues that, given this identity of goals, the rubric of choice is an empty gesture; an implicit structural determinism underlies this assumption of the homogeneity of ends: '[a]ctors generally have reasons for their actions but there are no grounds for supposing that the form of reasoning involved should be the same for all voters, all parties, or all entrepreneurs' ('Rational Choice Theory and the Analysis of Political Action', p. 267).

68. Lebowitz, M., 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', p. 198.

69. 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', pp. 58–9.

70. *Solomonic Judgements*, pp. 69–70.

71. Ibid., pp. 27ff. Elster here argues that rational choice theory is primarily a normative theory rather than an explanatory one: 'rational choice theory is first and foremost normative. It tells us what we ought to do in order to achieve our aims as well as possible. It does not, in the standard version, tell us what our aims ought to be . . . . From the normative account, we can derive an explanatory theory by assuming that people are rational in the normatively appropriate sense' (p. 3).

72. 'Let us suppose that in the beginning there is a small nucleus of revolutionaries fired by the vision of a better society. Their actions cannot be explained in terms of the adequacy of their means to that end or the desire for individual gains. It matters little whether they are mad, irrational, Kantians or men of principle. The essential fact is their commitment to non-instrumental value. As the revolution progresses, they will be indispensable . . . .' (Elster, J., *Political Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 22). 'From Leipzig to Bucharest, we have observed the snowball effect by which

crowds and demonstrations grow bigger from one occasion to the next. In East Germany and in Prague, the stupid reactions of the authorities acted as a catalyst to speed up the process. But the movement also had an internal dynamic. We know little about the motivation of those who made up the core in the first demonstrations, where numbers rarely went beyond four figures. Some probably had nothing to lose; others may have acted on something like the categorical imperative; some may have perceived, shrewdly, that by participating in what was likely to be a small event they could have an impact on the size of future demonstrations; some may have joined for kicks; and some out of plain eccentricity'. ('When Communism Dissolves', *London Review of Books*, 25 January 1990, p. 4.)

73. *Political Psychology*, p. 23.
74. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
75. For further discussion of Elster's recent work see my review of *Political Psychology* in *Radical Philosophy*, 68, autumn 1994.
76. Lebowitz, M., 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', p. 196.
77. Ibid., pp. 197–8.
78. Bhaskar, R., *Reclaiming Reality*, p. 72.

Chapter 3

1. Engels, F., 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', in Tucker, R., ed., *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 700.
2. Shaw, W., 'Historical Materialism', in Bottomore, T. *et al*, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, second edn, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 235.
3. *KMTH*, p. ix.
4. Ibid., p. x.
5. Ibid., p. x., n. 1.
6. Marx, K., 'An Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy', in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, pp. 4–5.
7. Ibid.
8. Marx, K. and Engels, F., *Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 473.
9. The weight that Marxism's reconstructors have accorded to the 1859 Preface has aroused the suspicions of many of the paradigm's critics. Thus Richard Miller writes: 'Every classic, systematic exposition of Marx's technological determinism, from Plekhanov's *The Development of the Monist View of History* at the turn of the century to Cohen's recent *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* constantly returns to the scaffolding of this passage . . . . This habit makes some of us suspicious. The passage is part of a short autobiographical sketch. It follows a modest introductory sentence: "The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows." I can think of no other major theorist whose general theory is often reconstructed in large part, by a close reading of a brief formulation embedded in an autobiographical sketch in a preface to a book that he gladly allowed to go out of print, as superceded by later writings' (Miller, R., *Analyzing Marx*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, p. 175).

10. Cohen explicitly denies, in a footnote, that his version of Marx's theory of history should be designated as 'technological determinism', in so far as this implies that 'the course of human history and, more particularly, the future socialist revolution are . . . inevitable . . . despite what men may do' (*KMTH*, p. 147). Cohen points out that on his interpretation the driving force of history is the actions of rational men – history progresses in a certain direction because of what men do, and not in spite of what they do. Allowing this, it still seems quite appropriate to identify Cohen's interpretation of Marx's theory of history as a technological determinist one: for him it is 'man's' preoccupation with technological development that is the ultimate determinant of the 'course of human history'.

11. *KMTH*, p. x.

12. Ibid., p. 134.

13. Ibid., p. ix.

14. Kautsky, K., *The Class Struggle* (1892), quoted in Callinicos, A., *Marxism and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 63.

15. Shaw, W., *Marx's Theory of History*, Hutchinson, London, 1978, p. 6.

16. *KMTH*, p. x. Ironically, Althusser identified technological determinism with Hegelian and teleological readings of Marx's theory of history – or, more precisely, with those interpretations of Marx which have taken a more or less literal view of Marx's famous inversion of the Hegelian dialectic: 'For Hegel's "pure" principles of consciousness, for the simple internal principle which he conceived as the principle of intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people . . . [is] . . . substituted *another simple principle*, its opposite: material life, the economy – a simple principle which in turn becomes the sole principle of the universal intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people . . . . The logical destination of this temptation is the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic* – the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*, that is, in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: *economism* and even *technologism*' (Althusser, L., *For Marx*, Verso, London, 1990, p. 108).

17. Cohen, G.A. and Acton, H.B., 'On Some Criticisms of Historical Materialism' (symposium), *Aristotelian Society, Proceedings*, supp. vol., 1970, p. 121.

18. *KMTH*, p. ix.

19. Bober, M., *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1950, p. 314.

20. Acton, H.B., *The Illusion of the Epoch*, Cohen and West, London, 1955, p. 168.

21. See *KMTH*, pp. 28–31.

22. Marx, K., 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 4.

23. *KMTH*, p. 30.

24. *Marx's Theory of History*, p. 21.

25. *KMTH*, p. 47.

26. See ibid., pp. 45–7.

27. Ibid., p. 47: 'Whether an item is a productive force depends not on its ontology (how physical it is) but on whether it contributes to production in virtue of the material character of production' – 'material', then, is not to be contrasted with the 'mental', but with the 'social'.
28. Consider using GNP as a measure: a country that was producing nothing but primary goods with high market values would be at a higher stage of technological development than one producing a wide range of highly sophisticated manufactured goods with comparatively low market values. Economies would develop and decline with every shift in the price that the goods that they produced could fetch in international markets.
29. *KMTH*, p. 61. One problem with this is that it ignores the cultural and historical determination of needs.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 62.
32. Ibid. Given that 'luxury' goods are here understood as anything beyond those goods required to satisfy basic subsistence needs, this approach has bizarre consequences. Consider an economy that at *t1* provisions everyone with a daily mess of potage using rudimentary agricultural techniques on the basis of one hour of man labour per consumer; at *t2* it can provide a huge range of foodstuffs using more advanced agricultural techniques on the basis of one hour and three minutes of man labour per consumer; and, then, at *t3*, it begins a period of massive industrial growth with the consequence that diseconomies of scale make agricultural production marginally less 'efficient'. According to Cohen this is – 'in a theoretically central sense' – a tale of technological regression.
33. *KMTH*, p. 94. Notice that if the 'terms' are human individuals, this assumes that individuals can be identified prior to their entry into social relations.
34. Ibid., p. 35.
35. *The Illusion of the Epoch*, pp. 161–2.
36. Plamenatz, J., *Man and Society*, Volume 2, Longman, London, 1963, p. 281.
37. *Man and Society*, Volume 2, p. 283–4.
38. *KMTH*, p. 111.
39. Ibid., p. 169.
40. Ibid., p. 219.
41. Ibid.
42. 'The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together . . . what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?' (Marx, K. and Engels, F., *Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 477).
43. *Man and Society*, Volume 2, pp. 282–3.
44. *Marx's Theory of History*, p. 56.
45. Wood, A., *Karl Marx*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 71.
46. *Marx's Theory of History*, p. 6.
47. *KMTH*, p. 160.
48. Ibid., p. 161.
49. Ibid., p. 179.
50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., p. 231.
53. Ibid., p. 163.
54. Ibid.
55. Sayers, S., 'Marxism and the Dialectical Method', in Sayers, S. and Osborne, P., *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1990, p. 142.
56. Similarly, '[i]f, by "thought experiment", a human being were entirely removed and abstracted from all his social relationships, he would be unlikely to survive the first few days of infancy; but, even if he did do so, he would emerge as a mere animal of the human species, without any individuality or other distinctively human characteristics' (ibid., p. 151).
57. *Analyzing Marx*, p. 199.
58. Ibid., p. 200.
59. Ibid.
60. On the positivist view, then, 'Marx's theory of history must provide empirical general laws on the basis of which the main features of political and cultural institutions, the nature of large-scale commercial processes and the dynamics of fundamental social change could be predicted, in principle, given independent knowledge of antecedent conditions' (Ibid., p. 196).
61. There is, for example, not a single reference to the work of any of these three philosophers of science (or, indeed, to Popper [!]) in Elster's *MSM*, a work that is centrally preoccupied with the philosophy of social scientific explanation.
62. '[T]echnological determinism and *a priori* anti-Marxism are two different aspects of the same positivist methodology' (*Analyzing Marx*, p. 204).
63. Ibid., p. 203.
64. See ibid., pp. 202–4.
65. Ibid., pp. 233–6.
66. Ibid., p. 233.
67. Ibid.
68. Miller continues: 'And that is not an empirical law but a tautology, as surely as the principle that anyone who is an uncle is male. Even the more specific scenario of the narrow mode of production theory yields only such tautologies as: if fettering of productive forces is sufficiently severe to give a subordinate group the desire and the means to overthrow the old economic structure, the structure will change. "Sufficient" cannot be explicated in any other terms than "sufficient to bring about the structural change"' (*Analyzing Marx*, p. 232).
69. Ibid., p. 298.
70. Sayers, S., 'Marxism and the Dialectical Method', p. 157.
71. See Cohen, G.A., 'Reply to Elster', in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, pp. 95–6.
72. *KMTH*, p. 278.
73. *Man and Society*, Volume 2, pp. 270ff.
74. *KMTH*, p. 257, n. 2.
75. Ibid., p. 260.
76. Ibid., p. 261.
77. Ibid., p. 262.
78. Ibid., p. 271.

79. 'Reply to Elster', pp. 99ff.
80. *KMTH*, p. 271.
81. Ibid., p. 291.
82. Elster, J., 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism', in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, pp. 50–51.
83. 'Reply to Elster', p. 98.
84. Elster, J., 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in Roemer, J., ed., *Analytical Marxism*, pp. 203–4.
85. 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', pp. 204–7.
86. 'Reply to Elster', p. 104.
87. Ibid.
88. 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', p. 206.
89. Ibid., p. 204.
90. Sayers, S., 'Marxism and the Dialectical Method', p. 163.

Chapter 4

1. Cohen, G.A., 'Reply to Elster', in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, p. 92.
2. *KMTH*, p. 134.
3. Ibid., p. 156.
4. Similarly, we could say that people with colds have a tendency to get severe headaches, even if in a particular set of cases, or indeed in all cases, medication prevents them from actually experiencing headaches.
5. *KMTH*, p. 152.
6. Ibid., p. 24.
7. Ibid., p. 152.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 153.
10. Human beings in the 'state of nature' would still be disposed – given their 'nature' – to develop and employ more efficient means of production, and would do so if everything else were equal. But everything else would not be equal. If an individual developed a new technique under conditions of lawlessness, then it would be vulnerable to destruction by rivals, the rewards of innovation would be insecure, and, therefore, the tendency to innovate would be suppressed.
11. *KMTH*, p. 153.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. For example, we can readily imagine a society in which technological development is actively suppressed by aristocratic rulers who perceive all such change as a threat to the existing order, and therefore to their own wealth and privilege.
14. *KMTH*, p. 150.
15. Ibid., p. 153.
16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 135.
18. Ibid., p. 158.
19. 'The "endless nuances" of pre-capitalist class history resist theorization as sets of production relations whose succession reflects a series of rises in the level of the productive powers' (ibid., p. 200).
20. Ibid., pp. 200–201.
21. Ibid., p. 171.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., pp. 158–9.
24. Brenner, R., 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', in *AM*, p. 34.
25. Epigraph to *KMTH*.
26. See, for example, 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', pp. 27–32.
27. 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', p. 31.
28. Carling, A., *Social Division*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 42.
29. *KMTH*, p. 170.
30. Ibid., p. 171.
31. Ibid.
32. Nor is there any reason to expect that these two different sorts of development will coincide. For example, let us imagine that feudal lords successfully increase exactions from their serfs and – for the sake of argument – that they devote these revenues to direct investment in machines which will produce weapons more efficiently. They have therefore invested in the development and employment of more efficient means of production in the sense required by the Development Thesis. But there is no reason to suppose that this will bring about any reduction in the man hours per consumer that are required to produce the means of subsistence. The increase in taxation will leave the peasants with either less time or less revenue to invest in their plots, and it is fairly clear that this could result in an increase in the amount of time that they are required to work on their smallholdings in order to produce for their subsistence requirements. Whether there has been development in this case all depends on where you are standing: if you are a feudal ford – or a rational individual – then there has been development; if you are a historical materialist, there has not.
33. Wright, E.O. and Levine, A., 'Rationality and Class Struggle', in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, pp. 38–9.
34. 'Rationality and Class Struggle', pp. 39–40.
35. *KMTH*, p. 61.
36. It might be objected that the exchange model assumed that she has acquired needs – for meat and alcohol – that exceed her subsistence needs But we can easily imagine that she is forced to exchange with other islanders in order to have *secure* access to subsistence requirements: for example that the supply of water on her island is unreliable, and she exchanges corn that she produces for water in order to mitigate the risk of being left without any.
37. Callinicos, A., *Is There a Future for Marxism?*, Macmillan, London, 1982, p. 145.
38. This point is clarified if we consider an analogous argument. Let us say that someone is seeking to explain the high incidence of tooth decay amongst children. She argues that this datum is explained by a universal tendency for children to eat a high proportion of foods containing sugar; that this tendency

is biologically determined; and that, although it may be frustrated by parental disapproval, it is omnipresent. A rival researcher requests some evidence that these biological determinants are present and operative, and is told that the argument is supported by the very fact that there. is a high incidence of tooth decay among children. It is clear that this 'evidence' has no bearing whatsoever upon the truth of the explanation that is being offered.

39. *KMTH*, pp. 175–80.
40. Ibid., p. 158.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., pp. 175–6.
43. Brenner, R., 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70, 1976; and Brenner, R., 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 97, 1982. Both of these articles have been reprinted in Aston, T.H. and Philpin, C.H.E., eds, *The Brenner Debate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.
44. 'By 1500 the same Europe-wide trends had gone a long way towards establishing one of the great divides in European history, the emergence of an almost totally free peasant population in Western Europe, the debasement of the peasantry to unfreedom in Eastern Europe' ('Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe', p. 23).
45. *Social Division*, p. 61.
46. 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe', p. 36.
47. Brenner, R., 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', in *AM*. See, in particular, the extended footnote (n. 13) on pp. 46–8.
48. 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', p. 46. There is a further condition. Cohen argues that technological development is driven by the rational individual's desire to satisfy *historically determined* wants and needs, and also that the emergence of capitalist relations predates the emergence of *grosse industrie*. But if new historical moral needs arise only after higher standards of living have become economically feasible, and are generally enjoyed, then the rational individuals who achieve the transition from feudalism to capitalism do so in order *to secure the conditions under which they can satisfy needs that they do not (yet) have*.
49. '[I]f one believes, as I have contended, that the unprecedented productiveness of capitalism derives not from any particular productive force or technique, but is a consequence of the property relations themselves, it becomes just about impossible to see how the sort of argument Cohen makes for the primacy of the forces can be sustained. This is, most simply, because, on this premise, no particular advance in technique – no increase in the productive forces – is necessary to bring about either capitalist property relations or the tremendous increase in productiveness associated with them. Thus, capitalism could appear at a point when no new techniques beyond those already available to the economic actors under feudalism had yet come into existence; in this case, it would still yield a tremendous increase in productiveness, because minimally, it would tend to bring about the generalised adoption of all those techniques only partially adopted under feudalism and because, more generally, it would constitute an economy in which all the economic actors find it rational to try to cut costs and increase efficiency as much as possible by specialising, accumulating, and innovating (and one in which those actors who failed to do

this tended to go out of business)' ('The Social Basis of Economic Development', p. 47, n. 13).

50. *Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 473.
51. *Social Division*, p. 11.
52. Ibid., p. 12.
53. Ibid., p. 50.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., p. 51.
56. Ibid., p. 52.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., p. 54.
59. Ibid., pp. 62–5.
60. Ibid., p. 65.
61. Ibid., p. 55.
62. Consider, for example, Cohen's discussion of the primitive society which eventually abandons its tradition of nautical heroism because this tradition now impedes the efficient employment of the available productive forces. This explanation surely presupposes that the change of ideology occurs *because* it is in the self-interest of rational individuals, as understood by the Development Thesis.
63. 'Whatsoever . . . is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition there is no place for Industry; because the fruits thereof [are] uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society' (Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 186).
64. *KMTH*, p. 204.
65. Wright, Levine and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, p. 45.
66. Ibid.
67. *KMTH*, pp. 310–11.
68. Ibid., p. 310.
69. Ibid., p. 318.
70. 'The compatibility thesis . . . [becomes] . . . equivalent to the claim that the relations of production become irrational with respect to a general notion of improving the human condition' (Wright and Levine, 'Rationality and Class Struggle', p. 37).

Chapter 5

1. *HLF*, pp. 3–29.
2. Ibid., p. 22.
3. *KMTH*, pp. 201ff.
4. See chapter 6.
5. This point is central to Wright, Levine and Sober's critique of Cohen's

'orthodox historical materialism' in *Reconstructing Marxism*: 'Incompatibility leads to contradiction only if there exist class actors capable of becoming bearers of a new social order, an order that would unfetter the forces of production. Whether or not such a class exists, however, depends upon specific historical forms taken by prevailing social relations of production, and not, as the orthodox view maintains, upon a dynamic invested in the forces of production as such – a dynamic derived, ultimately, from transhistorical human interests and capacities' (p. 38). 'The emergence of collective actors with interests in transforming the relations of production under conditions of fettering explains transformation of the relations only if those actors have a capacity to pursue their interests effectively' (p. 39).

6. In 'Fettering', printed in *HLF*, pp. 109–23.
7. *HLF*, pp. 116ff.
8. Ibid., p. 117.
9. Ibid., p. 114.
10. If the 'Net Fettering proposal' is to meet the 'revolution constraint', we must suppose that there is, at least, some reasonable probability that a revolution will actually occur where rate of development multiplied by degree of use is now less than it would be after a revolutionary social transformation: 'Social form A is arguably superior to social form B if, although A uses the forces to degree 0.6 and B to degree 0.95, A develops them so much faster than B that comparison of their trajectories shows a net effect of greater used productive power in A' (ibid., p. 117).
11. Ibid., p. 119.
12. Ibid., p. 121. Cohen stresses that he is not necessarily conceding that capitalism develops the productive forces more efficiently than socialism would do: 'the claim that it offers a qualitively superior way of life is the only one supporting socialism *if* one concedes that capitalism develops the forces more rapidly'. However, Cohen has offered no serious argument intended to demonstrate that socialism would in fact be more 'efficient' in this sense, and has developed – at length – the argument that socialism offers 'a qualitatively superior way of life'.
13. It is pretty clear that – a widespread interpretation of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' notwithstanding – a conception of human nature was of crucial importance for Marx's critique of capitalism and his vision of communism. (See Geras, N., *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, Verso, London, 1983, esp. pp. 84–5.)
14. Marx, K., *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 160.
15. *HLF*, p. 138.
16. Both Cohen *(HLF*, pp. 141ff.) and Elster *(MSM*, pp. 82ff.) have challenged the Marxist claim that 'the good life for man' requires liberation from identification with a prescribed role within a particular *division of labour*. It is not insignificant that – following Marxism's founders – they typically develop these (often insightful) points with particular reference to the role-identifications of creative artists. Most people, most of the time, neither embrace nor celebrate their structural locations: for every (professional) painter, there are countless accounts clerks, hotel porters, hamburger chefs, etc. Indeed, the particular roles foregrounded in these discussions are precisely those which, even within capitalist societies, allow participation in the 'fruits of civilisation' – that is, these are roles which have always permitted genuine creative self-expression. Cohen notes

that, for Marx, a communist society will contain no painters in two senses: (i) that nobody will spend all their time painting, and (ii) that nobody will be identified even as a part-time painter. On the first point, it is not implausible to suggest that very few genuinely free individuals would choose to dedicate their entire active lives to a single pursuit. Nor is there any good reason to think that Marx intended such role-diversification to be mandatory – no-one would be compelled (leaving aside here the continuance of necessary labour) periodically to abandon the easel for the fishing rod. On the second point, one wonders what the identification 'part-time painter' adds to the recognition of an individual by herself and others – as someone who paints (well) for some of the time.

17. *HLF*, p. 149.

18. 'Marxist universalism suffers from the abstractness of the Enlightenment universalism criticised by Hegel. The Enlightenment was wrong because the universal can only exist in a determinate embodiment: there is no way of being human that is not *a* way of being human' (ibid., p. 146).

19. Ibid., pp. 140–41.

20. Ibid., pp. 158–60.

21. Ibid., p. 160. 'Restricted historical materialism' would be empirically threatened if Weber had been correct concerning the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Defeating such rival theories would therefore be vital for the development and defence of the restricted programme. Drawing on H.M. Robertson's *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, Cohen argues that Weber committed a serious 'procedural error' in his appeals to religious texts that contained 'commerce-favouring injunctions'. This material was often taken from later texts which were significantly different from the originals. It was religion, therefore, that was adapting to capitalism and not *vice versa*: 'since the economy was . . . becoming more capitalist as time went on, and since it would be implausible to suppose that it was becoming more capitalist *because* religion was – for independent reasons – becoming more favourable to capitalism, Robertson was able to conclude that it was only because religion was adapting itself to a climate of capitalist enterprise that it, in turn, encouraged such enterprise' (ibid., p. 163).

22. Ibid., p. 165.

23. Marx, K., 1859 Preface, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 4.

24. Incidentally, making it a logical truth that the nature of the 'superstructure' is 'determined' by the development of the economic structure.

25. *HLF*, p. 172.

26. 'Without making oneself ridiculous it would be a difficult thing to explain in terms of economics the existence of every small state in Germany, past and present, or the origins of the High German consonant shifts, which widened the geographical wall of partition' (Engels, F., 'Letter to Joseph Bloch', in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 761).

27. From *The Theories of Surplus Value*, cited in *HLF*, p. 169. Later, Cohen echoes Engels's remarks in the famous Letter to Bloch: 'I was always aware that no one could suppose, and that no sane Marxist had ever really supposed, that every feature of, for example, a religious institution had an economic explanation. Historical materialism could not be committed to explaining why Anglicans subscribe to exactly Thirty-Nine articles, why the Jewish minion requires ten males, rather than nine or twelve, or why Rastafarians favour dread-locked hair' (ibid., p. 173).

28. *HLF*, p. 159.
29. Ibid., p. 90.
30. Ibid., p. 102.
31. Wright, Levine and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, p. 89.
32. A theory of historical trajectories is distinguished both from 'evolutionary theories' and from theories denying that historical development has any overall directionality at all: it retains the claim for *directionality*, while abandoning the assumption of historical *inevitability*. Such a theory does not imply: (i) that historical development is determined by any 'teleologically driven tendencies'; (ii) that all societies must necessarily progress through a definite sequence of stages; or (iii) that any 'universal mechanism' is implicated in each and every progressive social transformation – 'there may be a high level of contingency involved in any particular transformation' (*Reconstructing Marxism*, pp. 78–80).
33. Ibid., p. 53.
34. Ibid., p. 90.
35. Gidden's position – as developed in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981) – is summarised and examined in chapter 4 of *Reconstructing Marxism*.
36. Wright, Levine and Sober indicate that further retreats might prove necessary. Very weak historical materialism – 'quasi-historical materialism' – would also drop the claim that class struggle is exclusively (or even usually) the means through which revolutionary social transformations are achieved. Very, very, very weak historical materialism – '*Limited* historical materialism' – might go even further than this and drop the claim that history has any *overall* directionality at all – '[it] might hold that the theory pertains not to all of human history, nor even just to the history of class struggles . . . but only to the history of certain kinds of class societies' (*Reconstructing Marxism*, pp. 92–3).
37. Ibid., pp. 78ff.
38. Ibid., p. 79.
39. Ibid., p. 81.
40. Ibid.
41. Wright, Levine and Sober deny that this assumes a transhistorical definition of 'burdensome toil': 'The content of the activities defined as toilsome undoubtedly changes with the development of the forces of production. But in the human encounter with nature, some activities are experienced as unpleasant and even painful' (ibid., p. 81, n. 33). But doesn't this simply repose the same problem at a deeper level? What is experienced as unpleasant – as well as the individual's attitude to unpleasant and painful tasks – will be partially determined by the cultural and historical context. Some activities *may* be valued within a particular society precisely because they are painful and unpleasant.
42. Ibid., p. 81.
43. Ibid., p. 82.
44. 'In societies with class exploitation . . . there is no longer a direct link between the development of the forces of production and the reduction of burdensome toil. On the contrary, in many cases the introduction of new technologies resulted in the intensification of the direct producer's burden' (ibid., p. 82).
45. Ibid., p. 81.

46. There is another set of interests appealed to by Wright, Levine and Sober in defence of the claim that exploited classes have no general interest in technological regression: not the interests of the oppressed *qua* humans, producers or socialists, but their interests *qua* consumers. Increased production creates new needs – capitalism manufactures dissatisfaction – and technological regression prevents capitalist industry from delivering the goods that satisfy these needs. There are three problems with this argument. (1) A significant percentage of the total product in advanced capitalist societies does not satisfy the needs of direct producers. (2) While it might be responded that production of, for example, luxury goods secures jobs and decent wages for workers in the relevant industries, technological development also eliminates consumers: the shift to capital-intensive technologies may deprive millions of the means of satisfying new needs. (3) Marxists have argued that many of the 'needs' manufactured in the advanced capitalist countries are in fact 'false needs'. The transition to socialism requires a prior emancipation from 'false needs', and a corresponding reconceptualisation of the very notion of a 'standard of living'. It is not in the interests of the exploited (or anyone else) to get what they *want* where this prevents them from fighting to get what they *need*.

47. Not an unreasonable emphasis given that Wright *et al.* themselves concentrate almost exclusively upon this prospective transition. While they argue that technological development will occur in all pre-capitalist societies, and that this will tend to produce incompatibilities between forces and relation, there is virtually no discussion of the all-important transition from feudalism to capitalism, or of the transition from pre-class to class societies.

48. *Reconstructing Marxism*, pp. 35–6.

49. Ibid., p. 41.

50. Ibid., p. 100.

Chapter 6

1. See chapter 1 of *KMTH* for Cohen's discussion of the relationship between Marx and Hegel.

2. *AM*, p. 3. It is remarkable that Roemer can suggest 'that conventional Marxism sees no need to raise' these sorts of questions – as if the problems with, and the prospects for, socialist class struggle had been entirely neglected prior to the advent of Analytical Marxism.

3. Marx, K., 'Postface to the Second Edition', in *Capital*, Volume 1, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 99.

4. *Capital*, Volume 3, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 927. In light of the discussion in the previous section and the line to be developed in the remainder of this chapter it is worth noticing that this quotation continues: 'This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same in its major conditions – from displaying endless variations and gradations in appearance, as the result of innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, racial relations, historical influences acting from outside, etc., and these can only be understood by analysing these empirically given conditions' (pp. 927–8).

5. Marx, K., 'Preface to the French Edition', *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 104.

6. Mandel, E., Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 41.
7. 'Socially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society. The introduction of power-looms into England, for example, probably reduced by one half the labour required to convert a given quantity of yarn into woven fabric. In order to do this, the English hand-loom weaver in fact needed the same amount of labour-time as before: but the product of his individual hour of labour now only represented half an hour of social labour, and consequently fell to one-half its former value' (*Capital*, Volume 1, p. 129).
8. Ibid., p. 280.
9. Mandel, E., Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 3, pp. 29–30.
10. See, for example, Przeworski, A., *CSD*, pp. 148–57.
11. Conway, D., *A Farewell to Marx*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 85.
12. Ibid., p. 192.
13. Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 80.
14. See, for example, *Capital*, Volume 1, pp. 798–9.
15. See Bottomore, T., 'Classes', in *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, second edn, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 85.
16. Wright, E.O., *Interrogating Inequality*, p. 138.
17. Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 66.
18. A point made with considerable force and clarity by Tom Hickey in '"They are not tigers" – Myth and Myopia in the Quest for a Liberal Economic Order', in Brecher, B. and Fleischmann, O., eds, *Liberalism and the New Europe*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1993.
19. Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 83.
20. Howard, M.C. and King, J.E., *The Political Economy of Marx*, second edn, Longman, London, 1985, p. 124.
21. *MSM*, pp. 130–31.
22. Ibid., pp. 139–41.
23. *FTL*, p. 49.
24. Ibid., p. 49–51.
25. *HLF*, pp. 214, 215.
26. Ibid., pp. 226–7.
27. Callinicos, A., *Making History*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 68–9.
28. *MSM*, p. 554.
29. Ibid., pp. 160. For Elster's assault upon the theory of the falling rate of profit, see ibid., pp. 151–61.
30. *FTL*, pp. 1–2.
31. Ibid., p. vii.
32. Ibid., p. 20.
33. For a description of this basic model see *GTEC*, pp. 9–11, and *FTL*, pp. 14–15.
34. *FTL*, pp. 14–20.
35. That is, 500 days in the factory in order to produce 500 units of corn for consumption and to reproduce the initial capital stock, plus 1,500 days on the farm in order to produce a further 500 of corn. Given an initial capital stock of 500 units of seed corn and these two techniques (farm and factory),

the production of sufficient corn to secure subsistence requirements at a reproducible equilibrium requires a total of 2,000 labour days.

36. *FTL*, esp. pp. 17–20.

37. Ibid., pp. 20–25.

38. Total weekly production of corn in the factory is 1,000 units. Replacement of the initial seed corn leaves a remainder of 500 units. The total wage bill is given by dividing 500 total labour days by three – the wage rate being ⅓ of a unit of corn per day: 166.66 units of corn are therefore paid out in wages. This leaves a total of 333.33 units of corn to be shared between the 10 labour-hirers: 33.33 units of profit per labour hirer. (Alternatively, they might create a class of pure factory workers by employing 166.66 factory workers for three days each week.)

39. See *FTL*, pp. 90–98, and *GTEC*, pp. 87–105.

40. Ibid., p. 93, and *GTEC*, pp. 78–82.

41. *FTL*, pp. 82–4.

42. Ibid., p. 80.

43. It is an 'unnecessary appendage' to socialists' ethical concerns, because the mere presence of exploitation is insufficient to establish its moral iniquity. To demonstrate that there is anything wrong with exploitation, one would need to show that capitalists came by their initial endowments by some ethically objectionable route – and not, for instance, by working harder and being more thrifty than their feckless employees. It is an 'unnecessary appendage' to 'our' political concerns, because it is unlikely that class struggles are *de facto* motivated by opposition to the relations of exploitation. These are far from transparent: workers are much more likely to be radicalised by direct experience of inhumane working and living conditions, especially where combined with glaring inequalities in the distribution of wealth.

44. *GTEC*, p. 7.

45. The position is elaborated in *GTEC*, pp. 194ff. Notice that on this account the third criterion would rule out the possibility of exploitation emerging in the absence of any relationship between exploiters and exploited. Roemer's position is unclear here. In *FTL* he offers a technical definition of exploitation which makes no reference to relations of dominance, but only to socially necessary labour-time. His comments suggest that he now regards dominance as an entirely separate issue from exploitation. There is no mention of this third criterion when he states the *counter-factual definition* of capitalist exploitation in this work: '[An agent] is exploited if he would have been better off at the distribution of output associated with an egalitarian initial ownership of the means of production than he is at actual distribution . . . an exploiter is one . . . [who] . . . is rendered worse off by the change to an egalitarian distribution' (*FTL*, p. 133).

46. *GTEC*, p. 195.

47. Five, if the somewhat anomalous 'needs exploitation' is included. See *FTL*, pp. 135–47.

48. *GTEC*, pp. 270–71.

49. Roemer, J., 'Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?', in *AM*, p. 262.

50. Ibid., p. 276. For elaboration of the example, see pp. 275–6, and *FTL*, pp. 127–31.

51. Roemer, J., Introduction to *AM*, p. 3.

52. Lebowitz, M., 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', *Science and Society*, 52, 1988, p. 195. For a particularly ferocious assault upon Roemer's theory, see Locke Anderson and Thompson, 'Neoclassical Marxism', in the same edition of this journal.
53. 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', p. 196.
54. Ibid., p. 204.
55. *GTEC*, p. 81.
56. 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', p. 103.
57. Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 48.
58. Locke Anderson and Thompson, 'Neoclassical Marxism', p. 222.
59. 'The individual capitalists exploit the individual peasants through *mortgages* and *usury*: the capitalist class exploits the peasant class through the state taxes' (Marx, K., 'The Class Struggles in France', quoted in *MSM*, p. 183).
60. This point has been underscored by Elster: 'Since capitalism is the most highly developed market economy, and wage labour the central institution of capitalism, we may expect that labour market exploitation is the most important form of market exploitation. The formally equivalent exploitation through the credit market is less important in capitalism, because it does not tend to develop the productive forces, but it is the most important form of exploitation in pre-capitalist economies, interacting with non-market exploitation in various ways' (*MSM*, p. 185).
61. Wood, E., 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 59.
62. This problem is even more transparent when Roemer turns to model a dynamic economy, in which many goods are produced and there is technological progress. Here he adopts the assumption that 'all agents are accumulators, seeking to expand the value of their endowments (capital) as rapidly as possible' (*GTEC*, p. 113).
63. 'The compulsions of capital accumulation cannot be derived simply from the "optimising strategies" of a rational individual with capital "assets". Those compulsions cannot be explained without reference to the competitive pressures of the capitalist market, indeed the whole historically constituted social structure which has made individuals in capitalist society uniquely dependent on the market for the conditions of their self-reproduction, and hence subject to the imperatives of competition and accumulation' ('Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', pp. 48–9).
64. See Przeworski, A., *CSD*, pp. 223–38.
65. Przeworski writes that 'A Marxist economic theory – and by Marxist I do not mean someone who accepts Marx's assumptions or even his problems but someone who seeks to understand the relation between conflicts and developments in search of a universal emancipation – must be a theory that builds the full range of strategic circumstances into the very core of its assumptions. It must be a theory that would give economic actors a chance to organise, to struggle collectively, to exert influence over the state, and to have effects upon the economy. It must be a theory that would treat the particular structures of the capitalist market, the particular forms of the organisation of classes and of the state, and the particular patterns of exploitation and accumulation as contingent consequences of strategic behaviours of actors pursuing their goals in all the ways they can pursue them under capitalism. It cannot be a theory that poses for workers a false choice between individual pursuit of economic well-

being under automatically operating capitalism or a collective pursuit of revolutionary goals' (*CSD*, p. 233).

66. Locke Anderson and Thompson, 'Neoclassical Marxism', p. 226.
67. See Roemer, J., *AFFS*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 49–59, 66–71.
68. Wright, E.O., 'Coupon Socialism and Socialist Values', *New Left Review*, 210, 1995, p. 160.
69. Gray, J., 'Harnessing the Market', *New Left Review*, 210, 1995, p. 150.

Chapter 7

1. *CSD*, pp. 223–38.
2. Ibid., p. 237.
3. Ibid., p. 233.
4. See Fukuyama, F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1992.
5. Marx, K. and Engels, F., *Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 474.
6. Extract from Marx, K., *Capital*, Volume 3, *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 441.
7. Ibid.
8. *CSD*, p. 56.
9. Quotation from George Sand's *Jean Ziska* which closes *The Poverty of Philosophy*. See *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 219.
10. Engels, F., 'Letter to Kautsky of 1882', in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, p. 676.
11. Wright, E.O., *Classes*, Verso, London, 1985, p. 7.
12. Gilbert, M., *Marx's Politics*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1981, p. 4.
13. *Classes*, pp. 10–16.
14. Ibid., p. 87. See also 'Capitalism's Futures' in Wright, E.O., *Interrogating Inequality*, Verso, London, 1994.
15. *Classes*, pp. 20–24.
16. See Wright, E.O., *Class, Crisis and the State*, Verso, London, 1978. For a summary and critique of his earlier position, see *Classes*, pp. 43–57.
17. *Classes*, p. 36.
18. See 'Capitalism's Futures' in *Interrogating Inequality*.
19. See *Classes*, pp. 52–7, and also Wright, E.O. 'What is Middle about the Middle Class?', in *AM*.
20. Nor does the mere existence of domination necessarily indicate the presence of contradictory interests: '[p]arents dominate small children, but this does not imply that they have intrinsically opposed interests to their children' ('What is Middle about the Middle Class?', p. 117).
21. See *Classes*, pp. 54–5.
22. For Wright's relations to Roemer, see *Classes*, chapter 3.
23. Ibid., p. 132.
24. Ibid., p. 131.
25. Ibid., pp. 73–7.
26. Ibid., p. 75.

27. Ibid., p. 137.
28. Wright introduces the notion of organisational assets – control over the asset of 'organisation' – due to dissatisfaction with the Roemerian concept of 'status exploitation'. See *Classes*, pp. 78–82. For the results of his empirical survey, see *Classes*, pp. 163ff.
29. Ibid. p. 115.
30. 'What is Middle about the Middle Class?', p. 138.
31. *Classes*, p. 96.
32. *MSM*, p. 394.
33. *Classes*, p. 97.
34. Ibid., p. 98.
35. Ibid., p. 115.
36. See ibid., pp. 118–22.
37. Ibid., pp. 119–20.
38. Ibid., pp. 121–2.
39. *CSD*, p. 230.
40. Ibid., pp. 150–51.
41. Ibid., p. 150.
42. Ibid., p. 165.
43. Ibid., p. 239*n*.
44. Ibid., p. 27.
45. Przeworski, A. and Sprague, J., *Paper Stones*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p. 56.
46. *CSD*, p. 239.
47. Ibid., p. 5.
48. Ibid., p. 12.
49. Ibid., p. 108.
50. Ibid., p. 47.
51. Ibid., p. 69.
52. Ibid., p. 21.
53. Ibid., pp. 42–3.
54. Ibid., p. 247.
55. *HLF*, p. 132.
56. Wright, Levine and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, p. 100.
57. For the debate regarding Marxism and morality in general, and justice in particular, see the following seminal texts: Buchanan, A.E., *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism*, Methuen, London, 1982; Geras, N., *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, Verso, London, 1983; Geras, N., 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice', reprinted in Callinicos, A., ed., *Marxist Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989; Lukes, S., *Marxism and Morality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987. The following collections are also useful: Cohen, M., Nagel, T., and Scanlon, T., eds, *Marx, Justice and History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, and McLellan, D. and Sayers, S., *Socialism and Morality*, Macmillan, London, 1990.
58. *FTL*, p. 4.
59. Cohen, G.A., 'More on Exploitation and the Labour Theory of Value', *Inquiry*, 25, 1988, quoted in Roemer, J., 'Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?', in *AM*, p. 278.
60. *FTL*, p. 63.
61. Ibid., p. 66.

62. Which is assumed by Rawls's 'general conception of justice': 'All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured' (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 303).

63. See ibid., pp. 302–3.

64. Given Rawls's difficulties in specifying the precise criteria for membership of the worst-off group, there is nothing obviously non-Rawlsian in identifying this group precisely as the coalition of exploited agents.

65. The original position is set up on the clear assumption that all inequalities (for example, those providing incentives to those with scarce skills) are unjust. But Rawls proceeds to argue that departures from egalitarianism may be justified on grounds of efficiency – where, that is, they benefit the worst-off group. Rawls might therefore be susceptible to an 'immanent critique' leading away from the difference principle and in the direction of a radical egalitarianism.

66. *GTEC*, p. 276. This is doubly misleading. Firstly, given the presence of skills exploitation in socialist societies – and assuming inequalities cannot ultimately be justified by skills differentials – then Roemer will also have to say that 'although early socialism will be progressive, and its exploitation will be socially necessary, it will be unjust'; secondly, it is simply not true that '[i]f capitalist relations of property are progressive in the Marxian sense in early capitalism, then early capitalism is just for Rawls'. This will all depend upon the position of the worst-off group, but – as Roemer concedes (*GTEC*, p. 275) – the position of the least-advantaged may be worse in early capitalism than it had been under feudalism.

67. Ibid., p. 275.

68. *AFFS*, p. 26.

69. Ibid., p. 149 n. 5.

70. Ibid., p. 125.

71. Van Parijs, P., 'Rawlsians, Christians and Patriots', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1, 3, 1993, p. 309.

72. *Solomonic Judgements*, p. 205. Previously, in *MSM* (p. 230), Elster had argued that the 'difference principle' was an improvement upon the 'contribution principle' as a second-best to the 'needs principle': 'If we assume that the needs principle embodies some form of egalitarianism . . . , the contribution principle is presented as a second-best substitute for equality. I believe that Rawls' difference principle would serve better as such a substitute.'

73. See, in particular, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics*, 99, 1988–9.

74. 'What is a Marxist Today?', in Ware, R. and Nielson, K., eds, *Analyzing Marxism*, p. 40.

75. 'I think socialists should count themselves victorious, in the short-run, if they can design systems that bring about the degree of income equality and level of public services that exist in the Nordic social democracies' (*AFFS*, p. 54).

76. Far and away the most detailed and engaging recent defence of market socialism is Schweickhart, D., *Against Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993. For further discussion, see my review in *Radical Philosophy*, 72, July/August 1995.

77. *Solomonic Judgements*, pp. 175ff.
78. Ibid., p. 206.
79. *AFFS*, p. 6.
80. Ibid., p. 20.
81. See Van Parijs, P. and Van der Veen, R., 'A Capitalist Road to Communism', *Theory and Society*, 15, 1987.
82. See Van Parijs, P., 'Basic Income Capitalism', *Ethics*, 102, 1992.
83. 'Harnessing the Market', *New Left Review*, 210, 1995, p. 149.

Chapter 8

1. Cohen, G.A., 'Back to Socialist Basics', *New Left Review*, 207, 1994.
2. As reported by Wright, E.O., *Interrogating Inequality*, p. 180.
3. 'The Future of a Disillusion', *New Left Review*, 190, 1991, p. 14 (Reprinted in *Self-Ownership, Equality and Freedom*).
4. 'Is "Analytical Marxism" Marxism?', p. 195.
5. 'Neoclassical Marxism', p. 215.
6. 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle', p. 84.
7. Ryan, A., 'Can Marxism be Rescued?', *London Review of Books*, 17 September 1987, p. 10.
8. Ibid., p. 9.
9. Ibid., p. 10.
10. Ibid.
11. *Political Psychology*, p. 69. Without even a passing reference to recent work by Cohen or Wright, Levine and Sober, Elster dispenses with historical materialism on the second page of this book: 'progress in the social sciences does not lie in the construction of general theories such as historical materialism, Parsonian sociology, or the theory of economic equilibrium. The aim of such theories – to establish general and invariable propositions is and will always remain an illusory dream' (ibid., p. 2).
12. The neglect of Karl, that is – not the preoccupation with Groucho.
13. Gray, J., 'The System of Ruins', in *Post-Liberalism*, p. 84.
14. Gray, J., 'The Academic Romance of Marxism', in *Post-Liberalism*, p. 97.
15. Gray, J., 'Harnessing the Market', *New Left Review*, 210, 1995, p. 149.
16. Roemer, J., ed., *Analytical Marxism*, p. 4.
17. *ITKM*, p. 4.
18. See Popper, K., 'What is Dialectic?', in *Conjectures and Refutations*, fourth edn, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974.
19. Levine, A., 'What is a Marxist Today?', in Ware, R. and Nielsen, K., *Analyzing Marxism*, p. 40.
20. Ibid., p. 42.
21. Ibid., p. 53.
22. Ibid., p. 52.
23. Ibid., p. 53.
24. 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', p. 88.

25. Nielsen, K., 'Afterword: Remarks on the Roots of Progress', in Ware, R. and Nielsen, K. *Analyzing Marxism*, p. 535.
26. 'What is a Marxist Today?', p. 55.
27. Hobsbawm, E., *Politics for a Rational Left*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 4.
28. Berlin, I., *Karl Marx – His Life and Environment*, fourth edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, pp. 98–9.

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